

How to grow rhubarb

Rhubarb (*Rheum rhabarbarum*)

Family: Polygonaceae (Smartweed)

Ease of growing: Easy

Nutrient needs: Medium

Water needs: Medium

Common propagation: Crown

Spacing: 3' to 5'

Depth: 2" to 3"

General

Rhubarb is an herbaceous perennial. The only edible part is the petiole, or leaf-stem. Both roots and leaves contain enough oxalic acid and soluble oxalates to make even a small portion toxic. The edible petioles are red, pink or reddish green. They are commonly used in pies and jam. The rhubarb plant becomes large and rangy and is not suitable for small gardens. It prefers cool weather and is adaptable to just about any well-drained soil type. It requires five to six hours of sunlight, so you can grow it in partial shade. Once planted, it needs little care.

Preparation and planting

Rhubarb is planted as a crown at a depth of 2 to 3 inches. It is hardy and should be planted as early as possible in the spring. Deep, well-drained soils high in organic matter are best. Growing a cover crop and adding lots of aged manure or compost before planting will help insure long-term health. Taking care of perennial weeds before planting will also greatly increase

the ease of future management. Keep crowns well watered until established and mulch to keep down weed competition.

Care

Rhubarb benefits from annual applications of Nitrogen of up to 150 lbs of N/A, split between early spring and mid-summer. Irrigation is most important in the heat of the summer following harvest, to insure adequate leaf growth to promote root storage before winter. Remove seedstalks as they appear since they inhibit petiole production. After five to eight years, crowns should be divided to avoid thick stands with only slender spindly stalks.

Major pests

Insects: Rhubarb curculio and cutworms.

Diseases: Phytophthora crown rot, leaf spot, various viruses.

Harvesting and storage

Some harvesting can begin the second year after planting with a full harvest in the third year. Harvest by pulling fully expanded leaves from the plant at the soil line. Cutting is also OK, but may increase the chance of disease issues. Do not remove more than half of the plant; some leaves must remain to produce root storage for next year's production. The harvest season continues for up to eight to 10 weeks. Each plant should yield three to five pounds. Store stalks in the refrigerator for up to two to three weeks.

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Developed by James Manning, Undergraduate Research Assistant, and Daniel Brainard, Vegetable Extension Specialist; MSU Department of Horticulture; Gary Heilig, MSU Extension educator.

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