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GROWING RHUBARB IN THE HOME GARDEN

Rhubarb is a perennial vegetable, grown from leafstalks which are used for pies and sauces. This member of the buckwheat family originated in Asia, probably in Siberia, and was grown in China for medicinal purposes as early as 2700 B.C. It was first introduced into Europe about 1608 and was widely grown in America by the early 1800's.

Rhubarb is a cool season crop rarely successfully grown in the U.S. where the average summer temperature is above 75 degrees or where the winter mean temperature is above 40 degrees. It does well in all parts of Ohio. The tops are usually killed in the first heavy freeze in the fall, but roots survive and produce new tops the following spring. The crop is grown throughout most of the northern states.

VARIETIES - Rhubarb varieties used for outdoor production are characterized by pink-to-red stalks or petioles. Varieties which are successfully grown in Ohio include: MacDonald, Valentine, and Canada Red.

SOIL AND FERTILIZATION - Rhubarb will grow and produce on most soils, but a deep, well-drained sandy loam or silt loam is preferred. Liming is generally not required since the crop does best under slightly acidic conditions. Organic matter content in light soils should be increased by the addition of peat moss or planted to a cover crop such as rye to build up soil organic matter prior to establishing the planting.

Fertilizer applications should be based on results of soil tests; however, if soil test results are not available, a broadcast application of 2.5 to 3.5 lbs. per 1000 square feet (1000 to 1500 lbs. per acre) of 10-10-10 or other similar complete fertilizer is satisfactory for most locations. The fertilizer should be worked into the soil thoroughly to a depth of several inches at planting time. In succeeding years, surface applications around the plants may be made. An additional 1/4 lb. per 100 square feet of ammonium nitrate (or equivalent) in late June or July after the last harvest is often helpful.

PLANTING AND CULTURE - When selecting a rhubarb planting site, consider exposure and location. Earlier harvests are favored by a southern exposure, free from shading trees or buildings. Since rhubarb is a perennial, it should be planted to one side or at the end of the garden so as not to interfere with planting and growing other vegetables. The planting area should be free of quackgrass and other hard to control perennial weeds.



Rhubarb is not grown from seed, but from roots or crowns of plants at least one year old. These new crowns or sets come from older crowns. The sets can be purchased from garden centers or by dividing established crowns. Planting stock is prepared by splitting crowns into 4 to 8 pieces (divisions), depending on crown size, so that each new set will have at least one bud and a large root piece for nourishment. Only the healthiest plants should be used for replanting. The sets are planted 3 to 5 feet apart in each direction - square planting allows for cultivation in two directions. Crowns should not be covered too deeply, 2 to 3 inches will be adequate. The tops of the buds should be divided every 5 to 7 years or when the stalks become thin.

Most gardeners prefer spring planting although rhubarb can be planted in the fall after dormancy occurs. A good rule of thumb for spring planting is to plant as early as soil can be worked. A 3 - 4 inch deep mulch of clean straw, sawdust, peat moss, or similar materials can help control weeds in the planting and conserve soil moisture for plant growth and development. Flower stalks should be removed as they appear.

HARVEST - Leafstalks should not be harvested the first year and only a few should be harvested the second year. After the crop is established (third year), rhubarb is harvested in late May and throughout June in Ohio. The leafstalks are harvested by grasping them near the base and pulling them slightly to one side in the direction of growth. Stalks can be harvested as soon as they reach desired size. Harvest only the largest leafstalks, leaving sufficient leaf area to insure a good crop the following year. The leaf tissue should be removed from the stalks and discarded as the leaf blades are poisonous. Fresh rhubarb can be stored 2 - 4 weeks at 32 degrees and 95% humidity. Storage in perforated polyethylene bags in a refrigerator crisper compartment is generally satisfactory.

After the last harvest in early July, the plants should be allowed to grow until killed by frost. After the tops are dead and the ground is frozen, the rows can be covered with a 2 - 3 inch straw mulch. Remove one half of the mulch before growth starts the following spring.

PESTS - Foot rot, also called phytophthora crown rot, is the most serious disease of rhubarb. Slightly sunken lesions start at the base of the leafstalk and enlarge rapidly to cause the whole stalk to collapse; stalks may continue to collapse until the entire plant is killed. Remove and destroy dying leaves and plants. Apply a drench of fungicide containing captan or basic copper sulfate to the crown and the surrounding soil.

The rhubarb curculio, a rusty snout beetle about 3/4 inch long, can cause serious damage to leafstalks. Curly dock is an alternate host for the insect; therefore, dock plants around the rhubarb should be destroyed.



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