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The Return of the Rhubarb

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The appearance of the first leaves of my rhubarb plants unfolding are the best sign of spring for me. Those little shoots spark hopes of winter's end and a new season's start, bringing renewal of life to all living things as well as to my garden. Rhubarb's return is exciting!

Rhubarb is one of three hardy perennial vegetables commonly grown in Connecticut. The other two are horseradish and asparagus. These three were common mainstays in our grandparents' gardens with rhubarb being the first fresh vegetable available before mass transportation made shipping food grown in warmer climates to us possible. It was often referred to as a 'spring tonic' after a long winter of canned, frozen and stored food from the root cellar.

Pick as a stalk fresh from the garden and rhubarb smells tangy and sour, just like its taste. If you have never bitten into a freshly picked rhubarb stalk, imagine a cross between celery and sour-green apple that gets your cheeks twisting with its tartness. For this reason rhubarb is commonly cooked with sugar into many kinds of baked-goods. Stewed rhubarb is also a wonderful dish consisting of chopped stems simmered in water with a bit of sugar and is really great served with dollop of crème fraiche on top.

Rhubarb is often combined with strawberries or other fruits in pies and jams. The strawberry offers sweetness and a more reliable red color to foods. Rhubarb can be added raw to smoothies and salsas. Stewed rhubarb spread onto parchment paper and dried in a dehydrator will make a type of fruit leather.

Another interesting use is to make rhubarb spirits by adding five chopped raw rhubarb stalks and a half cup of white sugar to a liter of vodka in a glass jar with a cover. Let sit in a dark place for one month and stir or shake daily. Strain out the rhubarb at month's end. Sip if you are a purist or mix with soda water. Now this drink should be named 'Stewed Rhubarb'!

Rhubarb pie is considered, as American as apple pie, although rhubarb is not native to North America. It was brought here from East Asia around 1800 when plant explorers were searching the world for new plants. Rhubarb grew well as a hardy perennial in places with hard winters but not hot summers. It does not do well in the southern parts of the United States due to excessive heat during the summer and lack of freezing temperatures in winter.

Here in Connecticut it is easy to grow as long as it is placed in fertile, well-drained soil and in a mostly full sun location. Rhubarb is a heavy feeder appreciating an annual fall application of well-rotted manure to keep its deep, fleshy roots healthy and happy. A spring fertilizing with one cup of 5-10-5 per plant will keep the clump productive for roughly 15 years. About this time a new rhubarb bed using new plants should be created. Water well during times of dry weather. If flowers stalks develop, remove them to keep the plant from spending its energy on producing seed. New plants are created by divisions, not by sowing seeds.

The stems of rhubarb are harvested once they reach about 10 inches tall. Cut or pull the stem from its base removing the stalk and leaf from the crown of the plant. Cut the leaf off and add it to the compost pile as the stem is the only edible part. The leaf contains toxic levels of oxalic acid. The stems contain much lower, tolerable levels suitable for human consumption. Leaves will be rendered harmless after breaking down in the compost pile.

Stalks can be red or green depending on the variety of the plant. 'Victoria' is a green-stemmed variety normally grown for its large stalks and vigorous growth. 'MacDonald' and 'Valentine' both have deep red colored stalks. Clumps of rhubarb were commonly shared among families and neighbors to get new gardens started. Today plants are available potted or bare-root at garden centers, catalogs or on the internet. Or, find a kindly, old gardener willing to share a section of their clump and let the tradition continue.

If you have questions about growing rhubarb or on other gardening topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.