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Now is the Time to Plant Rhubarb

By Susan Pelton, UConn Home & Garden Education Center



Rhubarb is an herbaceous, cool-weather perennial vegetable that grows from short, thick rhizomes. It produces large, triangular-shaped leaves, edible stalks and small flowers. Although it is classified as a vegetable since seed-bearing fruit is not consumed, the red-green stalks, which are similar to celery in texture, have a tart taste and are used like a fruit in pies, preserves, and sauces.

Rhubarb root has been used medicinally for thousands of years starting in China and then spreading to the Middle East and Europe by way of the Silk Road by merchants that included Marco Polo, among others. Chinese rhubarb root was highly valued by apothecaries for its laxative properties and its cost often outweighed other spices. In fact, the high cost inspired Europeans to attempt to cultivate the plant in the early 1600s. They were successful in replicating the medicinal properties but those cultivars, *Rheum palmatum*, *R. tanguticum*, and *R. officinale* but the variety known as Russian or Siberian rhubarb became the predecessor of modern rhubarb. *Rheum rhabarbarum* and the variety *R. x hybridum* are the rhubarbs that have been domesticated for food production.

It was in the 1700s that one of the biggest changes to the culinary use of rhubarb came about due to the increase of the availability of sugar to the everyday person. It was the addition of sugar that took rhubarb out of the categories of medicine and savory dishes and put this vegetable into the realm of desserts and preserves. Sweet and tart at the same time, strawberry rhubarb pie presents rhubarb in its most common configuration.

Rhubarb can be part of an edible landscape and should be planted in any area with full sun or light shade where it will be out of the way, at one end or side of the garden, as it will remain productive for 5 or more years. It should be planted in an area with good drainage or in raised beds.

Rhubarb is an easy to grow vegetable and the wide range of pH acceptable to it, from 5.0-6.8, makes it well-suited for a Connecticut garden. Have a soil test done through the UConn Soil & Nutrient Analysis Lab a year before planting if possible and amend the soil with aged manure or well-rotted compost that will increase plant production.

Starting rhubarb from seed is not recommended in New England. Rhubarb roots may be planted or divided in the early spring while they are still dormant or in early fall into the beginning of October. Carefully dig up roots that are more than 5 years old. The appearance of seed stalks or flowers is a sign that the plant needs division. Cut each root into 4-8 pieces ensuring that each section has a new bud and at least 2" of root. Newly divided plants should be put into the ground as soon as possible. The crown bud should be 2" below the surface of the soil. Plants should be spaced 3-4' apart in rows that are also 3-4' apart and mulched with 2-3" of straw. Remove flower stalks the first year after dividing or transplanting.



Rhubarb is fairly drought tolerant as plants can store water in their fibrous root systems which run 12-18" below the surface. During extended periods of hot dry weather plants should be watered deeply so that the soil is damp to a minimum depth of 3-6". Mulch will suppress weeds and retain water but do not cover the crowns. Rhubarb requires little to no fertilizer although $\frac{3}{4}$ of a cup of a balanced fertilizer (10-10-10) applied once a year in a ring outside of the stalks will benefit production.

Harvesting of rhubarb generally starts in mid-June. Do not harvest rhubarb stalks until the second year when stalks may be harvested for 1-2 weeks. After that, the full harvest period is 8-10 weeks. Pull the leafstalks off at the base by using a twisting motion and trim and discard the leaves. Wash the stalks well before using. Freshly harvested stalks can be refrigerated for a few days. The leaves of rhubarb contain the toxic substance oxalic acid, a nephrotoxic which is damaging to the kidneys and may be fatal in large amounts although common symptoms are shortness of breath, burning sensations in the mouth and throat, coughing, wheezing, laryngitis, and edema. If the leaves have been ingested do not induce vomiting but call the Poison Control Hotline at 800-222-1222. Oxalic acid will migrate from the leaves to the stalks of plants that have been exposed to freezing conditions, therefore those stalks should not be consumed.

There are few diseases and pests of rhubarb. Fungal leaf spots are more of an aesthetic issue but the botrytis fungus may affect leaf, crown, and stem. Both of these can be managed by keeping foliage dry and increasing the air circulation around the plants. The rhubarb curculio, *Lixus convexus*, is a snout beetle that bores into the stalks, crowns, and roots of rhubarb plants. Feeding injury appears as notches on the stalks and leaf edges. Adults can be hand-picked and destroyed.

Lesser pests of rhubarb include **spider mites** and **stem borers**. Despite good cultural practices, pests and diseases at times may appear. Chemical control should be used only after all other methods have failed. Please contact the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at 877-486-6271 for control information.