

Rhubarb

A perennial crop grown for its red stalk that has an acid flavor. It is among the first vegetables ready for use in spring. Because your plantings may last several years, locate plants in full sun at the edge or end of the garden area to avoid damaging them with annual tillage.

When to Plant: It is best established in early spring- March to April – by planting a plump, healthy “crown” consisting of a portion of the woody root system with some buds in a shallow trench. You can dig an old plant and divide the roots into 4-8 pieces for replanting.

Space: Plant about 2’ apart in rows at least 3’ apart. The crowns should be planted in a well-drained location with a slightly raised bed to encourage good drainage away from the center of the plant. The roots should be planted 1-2” deep.

Care: Fertilize the plantings in the spring so that spring rainfall will carry fertilizer into the root system, encouraging early summer growth. Rhubarb survives by producing vigorous leaves that produce food reserves stored in the root system, especially in the fall season. It thrives in cool locations and is fairly hardy in severe winters. Always provide good drainage; never allow water to stand over the row.

Harvest: Rhubarb must be established for a season before it can be harvested. Pull leaves as soon as they are large enough to use in the spring, and continue to harvest as long as the leaf stalks are large and thick – up to 7-8 weeks in the spring. After late May to early June, it is time to stop harvesting and allow the plant to produce summer growth for continued bearing the following season. In some seasons, rhubarb will produce seed stalks. These should be cut and discarded immediately as rhubarb that produces seed also produces less foliage, resulting in a less vigorous crop the next year. Rhubarb dries quickly. Trim the large leaves and place the leafstalks in plastic bags in a refrigerator to store for a week or more. Excess rhubarb can be frozen easily for later use.

Use: CAUTION-rhubarb leaves contain oxalic acid that may cause lesions in the mouth if eaten. Only the stalks or petioles should be eaten. After harvest, rhubarb stalks should be stored in the vegetable storage area and kept moist until used.