

Gardening in the ZONE[®]

with Iowa Gardening Magazine's Liz Gilman



Rhubarb

Get your dessert recipes ready because there's a certain vegetable that's about ready to be picked in area gardens. This week I spoke to Linda Naeve, extension program specialist at Iowa State University, about rhubarb.



Linda Naeve gives us tips for growing rhubarb.

According to Naeve, rhubarb is actually a vegetable that we eat as a fruit because we eat the vegetative portion-- the stalk or the petiole of the plant. And that's important to remember because the blade contains a moderate amount of oxalic acid that can be toxic. The unique acidity in the stalk however does give it a great tartness and flavor when sugared making it a great choice for pies, sauces and other desserts.

Rhubarb is started from divisions of the crown. Plants can be purchased at local garden centers or you may be lucky enough to receive

a division from a friend or neighbor. Dig and divide rhubarb plants just as they are starting to emerge from the ground. You'll then want to plant the rhubarb in a sunny, well-drained location as early as possible but I'm afraid you'll have to wait a few years before you can take your first harvest.

Naeve recommends a few varieties that do well in our area. For a red-stalk plant, you might want to consider 'Crimson Red', 'Canada Red', and 'McDonald'. Or if you would like to try a green-stalk rhubarb, Naeve recommends 'Victoria'.

According to Naeve, you want to harvest the stalks when they are 15 to 18 inches long. To do this, just grasp the stalk below the leaf and pull up and slightly to one side and then remove the leaf. Remember not to harvest more than two-thirds of the plant at any one time. You want to keep the plant vigorous and growing well and not weaken it. Plan to discontinue harvest about the middle of June. It has nothing to do with the quality of the rhubarb but more with the vigor of the plant. You want to let the plant build up food reserves for next year's growth and harvest.

Incidentally, you might have heard rhubarb called pieplant which seems appropriate since most people, including myself, associate rhubarb with pie. So start your picking and get the ice cream ready! 🍷

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