Horticulture Hints

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Rhubarb review

One of the most traditional garden plants is rhubarb. Often these long-lived plants may be found growing on abandoned farmsteads, or perhaps pieces have been passed down from generation to generation.

Rhubarb leaves are poisonous, but the stalk is edible. It is best to harvest rhubarb by pulling out the individual stalks, rather than cutting, which leaves an open wound for pest invaders. Wait to harvest new plantings until their third year of growth, as to allow the young plants to build up energy. On newer stands, it is recommended to stop harvest by mid-June, as to allow food reserves to build up for next season’s crop.

Although an incredible hardy plant, rhubarb appreciates an application of fertilizer in the spring, plus keeping weeds at bay, and watering during dry weather will help increase production.

Plant rhubarb in a sunny, well-drained site to avoid infection by any disease that may be present in the soil. During a wet year or in a poorly drained site, root-rot fungus can attack the plant. Replant in a new spot if this occurs.

On older plants, seed heads may form. These should be pulled out as soon as they appear to prevent energy from going into seed production. Seed heads indicate the plant needs to be divided, about every four or five years is best. Plant new divisions about three feet apart.

Did you know? Rhubarb flavor is not necessarily correlated with color. The red varieties are more desirable for pie fillings, as the red color is better looking than the bland color of cooked green varieties.

Gardening Questions? Contact McCormick at yvonne@iastate.edu for information or advice.