



Rhubarb in the Home Garden

The rhubarb leaf stalk is used in pies, tarts, sauces, jams, jellies, puddings, and punch. Although classed as a vegetable, rhubarb is used as a fruit because its high acidity gives it a tart flavor. Only the stalks or petioles should be eaten because the leaves contain moderately poisonous oxalic acid. The discarded leaves can be safely placed in the compost pile.

Cultivars

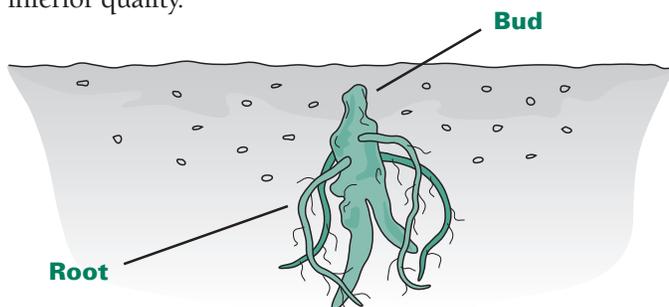
The cultivars Canada Red, Crimson Red, McDonald, and Valentine have attractive red stalks and are good choices for Iowa gardens. Victoria, a green-stalked cultivar, is another reliable performer. Rhubarb can be purchased at local garden centers or through mailorder companies.

Soil

Rhubarb does best in well-drained, fertile soils that are high in organic matter. Heavy soils can be improved by incorporating organic matter, such as manure or compost. The organic matter improves drainage and reduces the chances of root rot. Work the soil deeply (12 to 15 inches) and add liberal amounts of manure or compost before planting.

Propagation and Planting

Rhubarb is propagated by dividing existing plant crowns. (The crown is the portion of the plant where the stems meet the roots just at or below ground level.) While rhubarb can be grown from seeds, seed-grown plants will not be identical to their parent and are often of inferior quality.



Divide the crown of a healthy plant in early spring before growth starts and as soon as the soil can be easily worked. Dig deeply around the rhubarb clump and lift the entire plant out of the ground. Divide the clump into sections by cutting down through the crown between the buds. Each division should contain at least one or two buds and a large piece of the root system. Do not let them dry out. Set the divided section upright in the planting hole with the buds 1 ½ to 2 inches below the surface. Firm the soil around the plant, but not directly above the bud, and water thoroughly. Space plants about 3 feet apart.

Place new plantings where they will receive full sunlight and good water drainage. Avoid sites near trees and shrubs. Rhubarb will have a difficult time competing for sunlight, water, and nutrients when planted near trees and shrubs.

Established rhubarb plants can be transplanted in early spring and early fall (mid-September through early October). Rhubarb transplanted in fall should be mulched with 8 to 12 inches of straw or other coarse material. Mulching provides additional time for the plants to get reestablished at their new site before the ground freezes.

Fertilization

Rhubarb requires annual fertilizer applications for good growth and large yields. Apply fertilizer in early spring before growth starts.

Broadcast ½ cup of an all-purpose garden fertilizer, such as 10-10-10, around each plant and work it lightly into the soil. Avoid getting fertilizer directly on the crown. In most garden soils, only nitrogen is needed after using a complete fertilizer for 4 to 5 years.

Manure can be used as the main source of fertilizer by applying a 2- to 3-inch layer of rotted manure around the plants after growth starts in the spring. In addition to the nutrients it contains, manure also adds valuable organic matter to the soil. Manure should be supplemented with ¼ pound of superphosphate (0-20-0) fertilizer per plant.

Harvesting

Do not harvest rhubarb during the first 2 years after planting. This allows good crown and root development. During the third season, harvest only for a 4 week period.

Begin full harvesting in the fourth year. Cut stalks for 8 to 10 weeks, ending in mid-June. If harvested over a longer period, the rhubarb plants will be weakened and less productive the following year. Do not remove more than $\frac{2}{3}$ of the fully developed stalks from any plant at any one time.

Wait until stalks are 10 to 15 inches long. Then grasp the stalk below the leaf and pull up and slightly to one side. Remove leaves by cutting slightly below the leaf and discard them. Fresh rhubarb stalks can be stored in a plastic bag in the refrigerator 2 to 4 weeks.

Culture and Care

Water rhubarb plants during dry weather to maintain healthy foliage throughout the summer. Healthy plants are able to store large amounts of food in their roots, resulting in a good harvest the following year. During dry weather, a deep soaking every 7 to 10 days should be adequate.

Annual mulching with manure or compost improves soil structure and water drainage. It also helps conserve water and control weeds. When controlling weeds with a hoe, cultivate shallowly to avoid root injury.

Rhubarb plants will occasionally produce flower-like stalks that should be removed as soon as they appear because flower and seed formation reduces plant vigor. Infertile soil, extreme heat or cold, drought, or long days that expose plants to too much light may cause production of flower stalks. Old plants tend to flower more than young ones.

Rhubarb crowns often become overcrowded after 8 to 10 years. When this happens, the plant produces many small shoots and the yield is decreased. This problem can be controlled by dividing. After dividing the plant, wait for 2 years before harvesting again.

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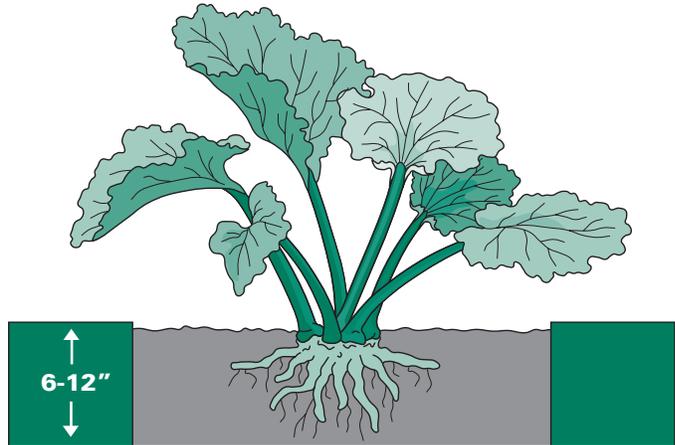
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Diseases

Phytophthora crown or "root rot" is a serious disease of rhubarb. Slight, sunken lesions at the base of the stalks enlarge rapidly, resulting in wilted leaves and collapse of the entire stalk. The crown and roots turn brown or black and begin to disintegrate.

Control root rot by setting disease-free plants in a site where rhubarb has not been grown for 4 to 5 years. Root rot problems also can be reduced by planting in well-drained soil. If drainage is poor, mound soil up and form a raised planting bed. This improves drainage.



Landscape timber, stone, or cement blocks

Diseases other than root rot also will attack rhubarb. Most problems can be reduced by planting in well-drained soil and a sunny location with good air circulation. Cultural practices that encourage good foliage growth after harvest will help prevent diseases, too.

Insects

Rhubarb curculio is a large, rusty snout beetle about $\frac{3}{4}$ inch long. It causes minor damage by puncturing the stalk. In most cases, little serious damage is done. Rhubarb curculio lays its eggs in wild dock stems. Elimination of weeds near the rhubarb planting in July, after the eggs are laid, will aid in controlling this insect.

Rhubarb stalk borer is an insect which overwinters in the egg stage on grassy weeds. Elimination of grassy weeds near the planting will control this pest.