



Rhubarb in the Home Garden

The rhubarb leaf stalk is used in pies, tarts, sauces, jams, jellies, puddings, and punch. Although categorized 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.

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.

Planting Site

Select a site that receives at least six hours of direct sun each day. Avoid shady sites near trees and shrubs. Rhubarb will have a difficult time competing for sunlight, water, and nutrients when planted near trees and shrubs.

Soil

Rhubarb performs best in well-drained, fertile soils that are high in organic matter. Heavy soils can be improved by incorporating organic matter, such as well-rotted barnyard 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.

Planting

Spring is the best time to plant rhubarb in Iowa. Plants can be purchased at garden centers or from mail-order catalogs. Digging and dividing large existing plants is another source of plants.

Plants growing in pots should be planted at the same depth as they are currently growing in their pots. Bare-root plants should be planted with the buds 1 to 2 inches below the soil surface. Space plants 3 feet apart.

Dividing Plants

Dig and divide large plants in early spring before growth starts and as soon as the soil can be worked easily. 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 two or three buds and a large piece of the root system. Replant the divisions as soon as possible.

Fertilization

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

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

Harvesting

Do not harvest rhubarb during the first two years after planting. This allows good crown and root development. During the third season, harvest for a four-week period. In the fourth and following years, rhubarb can be harvested for eight to ten 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 one-half of the fully developed stalks from any plant at any one time.

Harvest rhubarb by grabbing the base of the stalks and pulling up and slightly to one side. Rhubarb also can be harvested by cutting the stalks at the soil surface with a sharp knife. After harvest, trim off and discard the leaves. (The discarded leaves can be safely placed in the compost pile.)



Fresh rhubarb stalks can be stored in a plastic bag in the refrigerator for two to four weeks.

Culture and Care

Water rhubarb plants during dry weather to maintain healthy foliage throughout the growing season. 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 seven to ten days should be adequate.

Apply a 2- to 3-inch layer of mulch (dry grass clippings, shredded leaves, etc.) around rhubarb plants. A mulch helps conserve water and control weeds. When controlling weeds with a hoe, cultivate shallowly to avoid root injury.

Rhubarb plants occasionally produce flower stalks that should be removed as soon as they appear, because flower and seed formation reduces plant vigor and inhibits leaf stalk formation. Infertile soil, extreme heat or cold, or drought may cause production of flower stalks. Also, old plants tend to flower more than young ones.

Rhubarb crowns often become overcrowded after eight to ten years. When this happens, the plant produces numerous small stalks and yield is decreased. This problem can be solved by dividing the plant. After dividing the plant, wait two years before harvesting again.

Transplanting

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.

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 planting disease-free plants in a location where rhubarb has not been grown for four to five years. 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.

While a number of other diseases may affect rhubarb, most disease problems can be avoided or minimized by planting in a well-drained soil in a sunny location. Good cultural practices also help prevent diseases.

Insects

The rhubarb curculio is a large, rusty snout beetle about three-fourths inch long. It causes minor damage by puncturing rhubarb stalks. The rhubarb curculio lays its eggs in the stems of wild dock and other weed hosts. Elimination of weeds in and near the rhubarb planting in July, after the eggs are laid, will aid in controlling this insect.

The stalk borer also punctures rhubarb stalks. Elimination of grassy and large-stemmed weeds around rhubarb plants also helps control the stalk borer.

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