

RHUBARB

Gardening tips provided by
Jefferson Farm & Gardens

Overview

Rhubarb, *Rheum rhabarbarum*, is a cold hardy perennial vegetable of the buckwheat family and is related to dock, sorrel, and buckwheat. It is one of the few vegetables cultivated for its stem, but rhubarb has not always been grown for culinary reasons. Records dating back to 2700 BC in China indicate that rhubarb roots were cultivated for their laxative properties. It was not until the 18th century that the stalks were eaten. The leaves contain oxalic acid and are poisonous when consumed.

Choosing Varieties

There are several varieties of rhubarb available that differ in color and cold tolerance, as well as other traits. Recommended varieties for Missouri and other Midwest states are:

- Canada Red (heavy producer, long stalks)
- MacDonald (tender, bright red)
- Valentine (large red stalks)

It is recommended to try a few varieties to determine overall plant performance and personal preference.

Planting Tips

Rhubarb is a cool season perennial that struggles in hot, dry conditions. Since rhubarb will be productive for many years, an area needs to be selected where it will neither be disturbed nor interfere with the rest of the garden.

Rhubarb is often planted as crowns or plants rather than grown from seed. In Missouri, rhubarb can be planted in early April. Rhubarb thrives in well-drained soils and benefits from growing in raised beds or rows. The crowns should be planted so the buds are about 2 inches below the soil surface and spaced 3-4 feet apart in rows that are at least 3 feet apart. The rhubarb plants should be planted on the same spacing.

Rhubarb plants can become crowded, producing thin, tough stalks in 6 to 10 years. To rejuvenate the plantings, old crowns can be divided in early spring. The crown of the plant can be dug and then sliced into sections, making sure a few buds are left on each piece. The sections can then be planted following the above instructions.



Soil Fertility and Pest Control

Rhubarb crowns or plants should be planted in well-drained soils and would benefit from the addition of nutrients either in the form of a complete fertilizer or aged compost. Rhubarb plants would benefit from watering during a dry spell.

Rhubarb is usually free from pests, but stalks can be attacked by the rhubarb curculio. The large beetles can be handpicked from the plants during the early summer, which is the only direct control method. Dock, thistle, and sunflowers are hosts for the rhubarb curculio and removing nearby plants can help.

Crown rot is rare in home gardens and can be prevented by planting in well-drained soils and by purchasing disease-free crowns.

Harvesting

Rhubarb stalks should not be harvested during the first year of growth. During the second year, stalks can be harvested until the new stalks decrease in size, 1-2 weeks. Every subsequent year, stalks can be harvested until new stems decrease in size (usually 6 weeks). Only 1/3 of the stems should be harvested at one time. Stalks should not be harvested in the fall and enough foliage should be left to sustain the plant during the winter. When harvesting, the stalks can be pulled from the plant with a twist, or they can be cut. Be sure to remove the flower stalk as it appears to focus the plant's energy on producing more stems.

Seed Sources

Rhubarb crowns can be purchased from local garden centers or ordered from mail order companies via phone or website. Johnny's Selected Seeds (1-877-564-6697, johnnyseeds.com) and Henry Field's Seed and Nursery (1-513-354-1494, henryfields.com) are two companies that sell rhubarb varieties.

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