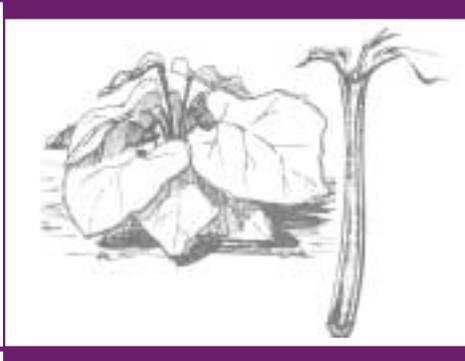


RHUBARB

Vegetable Gardens



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Rhubarb

Rhubarb (*Rheum raponticum* L) is a native of the cool areas of Asia, probably Siberia. It is a perennial crop that is grown for its large, thick petioles or leafstalks. It is used in sauces, jellies, and pies, either alone or in combination with various fruits. Its acid flavor makes it a substitute for fruit in the diet.

Rhubarb's water content is among the highest of all common vegetable crops. Rhubarb contains few calories, so it may be useful in low caloric diets. Nutritionally, rhubarb is a poor source of vitamins or minerals, but its unique flavor and texture, as well as its early spring production, make it a welcome addition to the diet.

Culture

Rhubarb grows well in many soil types, but it thrives in rich, well-drained loam soils. In most Kansas soils, generous applications of organic matter should be incorporated before rhubarb is planted. Using 50 to 100 pounds of barnyard manure or a similar organic material per 100 square feet of garden area is beneficial. Because rhubarb is a perennial, it should be located to the side of the garden or in an area not disturbed by yearly tilling.

Fertilization

Because rhubarb is a perennial, it is important to fertilize well before planting. Later only surface application of fertilizer can be used. If you do not have soil test recommendations, use 3/4 to 1 pound of 5-10-5 (or the equivalent) fertilizer per 100 square feet of garden space and plow into the garden plot before planting.

An established planting should be fertilized each year using 4 to 5 pounds of 1-10-5 (or the equivalent) per 1,000 square feet broadcast over the plot and worked into the soil early in the season before growth begins. Adding 2 to 3

pounds of ammonium nitrate per 1,000 square feet over the plot after the spring harvest season will provide nitrogen for good summer foliage growth.

Varieties

Compared with most other vegetable crops, relatively few varieties of rhubarb are available. The two varieties that have been used most widely in Kansas are Canada Red and McDonald. Other varieties with large red stalks include Valentine and Ruby. Strawberry and Cherry varieties or strains are particularly desirable because of the brilliant red of their stalks. An older variety, Victoria, produces large stalks but they are green in color. Many gardeners or garden centers have unnamed varieties. They may be acceptable; but some indication of the type of stalk the plant produces and its productivity should be known before choosing such varieties.

Planting

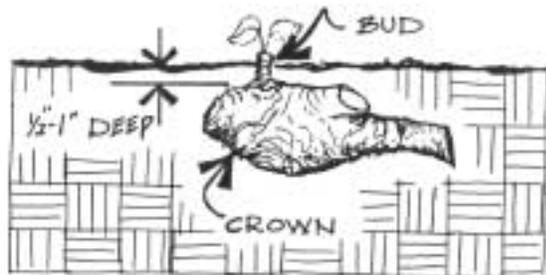
Rhubarb should be planted in the early spring. In Kansas, the suggested planting time is mid March to early April, about the same time as Irish potatoes. Rhubarb is propagated by planting pieces of older crowns or roots. The pieces are taken from dormant three-year or older crowns. The crowns may be purchased from garden dealers or seed dealers, or dug from a healthy, established planting during the dormant season. If you dig your own crowns, split them into pieces with each containing one large "eye" or bud. Each crown should produce four to eight pieces suitable for planting. Crowns should be kept moist until planted and should be solid, not spongy.

Plant rhubarb in a shallow trench so each bud is about one half to 1 inch below the soil surface. Plants should be 2 to 3 feet apart in the row, and if more than one row is planted, 4 to 5 feet between rows. Fill in the trench to cover

the crowns and firm the soil around them. Make sure there is not a “depression” along the row so excess water drains away quickly.

Rejuvenating an Older Planting

Rhubarb will lose productivity after 5-10 years with very productive plantings requiring more frequent rejuvenation.



Dig and divide crowns in the early spring (see planting section) by cutting older crowns into sections with a sharp cleaver or axe, leaving at least one bud or eye on a root section.

Cultivation and Care

Weeds can be controlled by shallow cultivation around plants. It is a good practice to use a mulch over rhubarb plantings not only to reduce weed growth, but also to provide winter protection and prevent moisture loss. A mulch can be applied during the fall. During the early spring it should be pulled back to allow the soil to warm and promote early growth. Later in the season, the mulch can be worked into the soil around the plants.

Snails and slugs may collect under the mulch layer in the spring months, so the plot should be checked periodically for such pests. If they appear, mulch should be removed.

Harvesting

Probably no other single factor affects home gardeners' success with rhubarb more than harvesting too much or too long. Rhubarb is a perennial crop, and its vigor and strength depend on stored food reserves that it accumulates during the previous season. For this reason, it is good to limit harvest the first several years. Rhubarb should not be harvested at all the first year, and only a few stalks should be taken the second year to insure a well established planting that will last for many years.

Rhubarb is one of the earliest vegetables to appear in the spring. It is a welcome sign of the other garden crops to come.

For an established planting, the harvest season lasts about 8 weeks beginning as soon as stalks are large enough to use. Harvest only the largest and best stalks. The stalks should break off easily if they are pulled slightly to one side. After the 8-week harvest season, allow remaining stalks to grow and develop foliage for a healthy crop the next year.

Seed stalks

Some years, it is common for rhubarb to produce a large, yellow seedstalks during the growing season. Seedstalks should be broken off and removed as soon as they form. Removing seedstalks will cause more food to be stored in the crowns and roots encouraging more leaf growth.

Use

A variety of recipes using rhubarb is available. CAUTION: Rhubarb leaves contain oxalic acid that may cause lesions in the mouth if eaten, so only the stalks or petioles should be eaten. After harvest, rhubarb stalks should be stored in the vegetable storage area of the refrigerator and kept moist until used.

Rhubarb Problems

Insects. The rhubarb curculio may damage rhubarb plants. This rust colored beetle will bore into rhubarb stalks or crowns. Another insect, the stalk borer, may cause a similar problem. Controlling grassy and large-stemmed weeds (especially dock) around the garden plot will reduce other hosts of these insects. No effective insecticides have been cleared for use on rhubarb.

Diseases. Crown rot is a serious disease causing a decline in rhubarb plantings, so choose disease-free crowns. If rot symptoms appear at the base of the plants or crowns, apply fixed copper or captan as a drench to the crowns and surrounding soil.

For further information on rhubarb and other gardening, see the following publications available at your local K-State Research and Extension office:

S-51 Kansas Garden Guide

L-41 Recommended Vegetable Varieties

C-595 Pest Control in Vegetable Gardens