



EDIBLE
GARDENING
SERIES



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Rhubarb

Growing Rhubarb

Text by Janet H. Sanchez

Gardeners plant rhubarb primarily to harvest its tart reddish stalks, then cook them with sugar into sauces plants, and well deserving of a spot in the ornamental garden. Each year this long-lived herbaceous perennial produces a crop of bold, heart-shaped leaves atop thick one- to three-foot stalks.

Most varieties of rhubarb grow best in regions where summers are cool and moist and winters are cold enough to freeze the ground to a depth of several inches. Gardeners in milder areas have found the varieties 'Giant Cherry' and 'Strawberry' to be successful.

Rhubarb is generally grown from divisions – chunks of crown with at least one bud, or growing point – rather than from seed, because seed may not produce plants exactly like the parent plant. You can buy rhubarb crowns from a local nursery or by mail, or ask a neighbor for a few divisions. Three or four plants will provide plenty of stalks for most families.

PREPARE THE SITE

Choose a spot in full sun with rich, well-drained soil. Remember that rhubarb is a perennial and will remain in its chosen location for years, so place it out of the way of annual cultivation at the edge of the vegetable garden (preferably on the north side where it won't shade other plants), or take advantage of its ornamental qualities and group several crowns in a flower border. In either case, allow each plant about one square yard.

Careful soil preparation will help your rhubarb remain healthy and productive for many years. Clear the spot of any weeds, being sure to dig out the roots of tough perennial ones. Then loosen the soil to a depth of 10 inches. For each plant, mix at least three to four inches of compost or well-aged manure and a handful of fertilizer that is relatively high in phosphorus and potassium (such as 5-10-10) into the soil.

PLANTING

Rhubarb crowns have to be planted shallow. At least ¼ to 1/3 of the crown surface should be above ground level when properly planted. If the bud itself is below the soil line it may rot off and fail to grow. We have seen fall planted crowns frost heave and roll around on the soil surface and still grow! This isn't an ideal situation, but it makes the point that a shallow crown will often grow and a crown planted below the surface almost certainly won't.

Victoria Rhubarb

Rhubarb grown from seed.
Color variation between green and red.
Red appears first, then turns green with sunshine.
Tends to grow seed stalks on an annual basis.

Crimson Cherry Rhubarb

Reddest variety.
Tends to be red all the way through.
Best commercial variety in the Pacific Northwest.