

Rhubarb

Rhubarb 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.

Culture

Rhubarb grows well in many soil types, but it thrives in rich, well-drained soils. In most Kansas soils, generous applications of organic matter should be incorporated before rhubarb is planted. Because rhubarb is a perennial, it should be located to the side of the garden or in an area not disturbed by yearly tilling. Fertilize well before planting each year with Chickity-Doo-Doo.

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. Rhubarb is purchased as crowns or plants.

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.

Rejuvenating an Older Planting

Rhubarb will lose productivity after 5-10 years with very productive planting requiring more frequent rejuvenation. Dig and divide crowns in the early spring by cutting older crowns into sections with a sharp cleaver or axe, leaving at least one bud or eye on a root section.

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 seasons. 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 ensure 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 seasons 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 seed stalk during the growing season. Seedstalks should be broken off and removed as soon as they form. Removing seed stalks will cause more food to be stored in the crowns and roots encouraging more leaf growth.

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 around the garden plot will reduce other hosts of these insects.

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.

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.



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