



J&L's Gardening Handouts

Tips and Suggestions for Year Round Gardening

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Rhubarb Care

I didn't always appreciate rhubarb. As a young child, when we would have a strawberry-rhubarb pie, I'd just pick at the stringy, tough rhubarb; my mother would have to force me to eat my desert. When we would have stewed rhubarb I would suddenly be too full to eat dessert, unless the rhubarb stew was accompanied with vanilla ice cream; the ice cream would disappear but the rhubarb somehow remained in the bowl.

Later, I discovered that rhubarb can be tender, and its sweet-tart flavor can be great in all sorts of delicious desserts. Even in high school, the taste of fresh made rhubarb stew, accompanied with vanilla ice cream of course, was an enjoyable dessert. Today, I still enjoy a nice bowl of stewed rhubarb, and an occasional home-made rhubarb pie.



The colorful leaf stalks are the edible part of rhubarb, and may appear in shades of red to pink to green. The stalks are usually too tart to be eaten raw; however, a delicious transformation takes place when the stalks are cooked and sweetened.



The leaves are poisonous to both humans and animals. Animals are usually smart enough to avoid rhubarb leaves. Although the leaves are not very tempting to eat, be sure to teach young children not to eat them.

Rhubarb fans debate which variety is the tastiest. Some claim that the redder the stalk, the more tender the rhubarb. Others say the green stalks are better. No matter what the variety or color, for the best flavor, they need plenty of water, and harvest them at the right time.

Intense-red varieties, such as 'Valentine' and 'Canada Red', have stalks that are usually shorter, thicker, and slower to emerge in the spring. In addition, they're less prone to early flowering than the lighter-colored varieties like 'Strawberry' or 'Victoria'. Although flowers can be pretty, they usually decrease a plant's production, so remove them as you see them emerge.



Canada Red (long, thick stalks, extra sweet)

Cherry Red (rich red inside and out)

Valentine (large stems 22" by 1-1/2" wide)

Victoria (Greenish-pink stalks have a tinge of red)



Rhubarb's large, heart-shaped leaves make it attractive in a vegetable garden or a perennial border. Give it plenty of room. The foliage stands 2' to 4' feet tall. Space your plants four feet apart.

Soil & Water

Rhubarb is best started from rooted crowns, which can be planted in early-spring. Though most people think of rhubarb as a fruit, due to its use in jams and desserts, it is an easy-to-grow vegetable. It is a perennial that has a cold

hardiness to USDA zone 3, although with winter mulch, it can be hardy in even colder climates. While rhubarb prefers cool weather, the plant can usually adapt to hot summers (especially if you started your plant early). For example, in a hot St. George summer, the leaves may die back in July, but resume growth later in the fall. We don't usually have that problem in Northern Utah.



For tender and juicy stalks, plant rhubarb in good soil, and full sun to part shade. Be sure the soil is rich in compost, and well-drained. Raised beds work great for rhubarb, or mix plenty of utelite or sand with your garden soil to improve drainage.

Harvesting

Once established, a well-fed plant will produce 8 to 10 pounds of stalks every spring. One plant may provide plenty for a family to eat occasionally. You should plant a few more if you like to eat rhubarb regularly, or if you plan to give it to your friends.



To give a new plant a chance to establish itself, wait two years after planting before you start harvesting. It's hard to be this patient. So, if you just can't wait, you can harvest a couple of stalks from each plant one year after planting, just don't harvest too much the first year or two.

Rhubarb is "ripe" all spring and summer. But there are certain times that are 'best' to harvest your rhubarb.

The best time to harvest rhubarb is when the stalks of the leaves reach at least 10" long. This will ensure that the plant has established itself well enough to tolerate being harvested. You can take some of the rhubarb stalks earlier, but limit your early harvest to just a few stalks, so that you do not damage the plant.



You can harvest rhubarb until fall, however, rhubarb plants need time to store energy for the winter. Reduce, or

stop your harvest, in late June or early July, so your rhubarb plant can build up its energy reserves, to make it through the winter. Again, it can be picked until the frost, but do so sparingly, or you risk killing the plant.



To harvest, choose stems that are 12 to 18 inches long and reddish in color. Grasp the stalk near the base and pull it upwards, twisting the stem as you pull. You can also use a sharp knife to slice stems from the plant. Cut as close to the crown as possible without damaging it. After harvesting, remove the leafy portion and the base of the stem, leaving only the colored stalk.

To keep the plant healthy, never harvest more than a third of the stalks at any one time. Stop harvesting when the plant starts producing smaller or slender stalks. In a well-fed rhubarb patch, this usually gives you about six weeks of rhubarb harvesting.

Remember: only eat rhubarb's stalks. Rhubarb leaves contain high concentrations of oxalic acid, which make them poisonous.

Fertilizer and Water

A good vegetable garden food such as **6-10-4 Vegetable and Flower Fertilizer** or **16-16-8 Multipurpose Fertilizer** is a good source of nitrogen. Fertilize early each spring to help your plants grow just a little bigger and faster.



Make sure that the plant gets plenty of moisture but do not keep them soggy wet, because it is susceptible to crown rot. Rhubarb is fairly drought resistant. However, dry plants do not produce as sweet of stalks as well watered plants produce. Just keep your rhubarb plants evenly moist and you should have delicious rhubarb stalks to harvest

Flowers

Rhubarb plants that bolt regularly produce fewer large-size stalks; their energy goes into flower and seed production. To keep production up, cut flower stalks off at the base when they first appear. Once the plant starts putting energy into setting seeds, it may slack off on producing the stalks.



Dividing

Divide rhubarb crowns every 10 years or so, when the middle stalks become spindly. In the early spring, dig up and separate your rhubarb clump into softball-sized rooted pieces with at least one or two buds each. Re-plant them in the same areas and start a few new rhubarb plants somewhere else in your yard.



Pests

You shouldn't have much trouble with pests. You may notice that slugs occasionally eat holes in the leaves, but not



too many other pests bother rhubarb plants. Slug and Snail damage is only aesthetic; it shouldn't hurt the health of the plant.

The only major disease problem with rhubarb is root rot (crown rot), often caused by keeping the plants too wet. Be careful, try to prevent root rot because there is not an easy way to control this disease once it begins. You have to dig up your plants and plant new roots somewhere else in the garden.



Poisonous Leaves

The leaves of rhubarb should never be fed to animals. Some animals such as rabbits, goats and pigs, have been poisoned by ingesting these leaves.



The following information is from the Pet Poison Helpline (<http://www.petpoisonhelpline.com/poison/rhubarb/>)

"Poisonous to: Cats, Dogs

Level of toxicity: Generally mild to moderate

Common signs to watch for: Drooling, Inappetance, Vomiting, Diarrhea, Lethargy, Weakness, Tremors, Bloody urine, Changes in thirst and urination.

Rhubarb is a common plant grown for edible consumption, and is also known as the pie plant. The leaves contain soluble oxalate crystals, with less of the crystals being prevalent in the stalk. That's why rhubarb stems are edible, but the leaves are not. Rhubarb is a soluble oxalate-containing plants contain oxalic acid and oxalate salts, and must be differentiated from insoluble oxalate plants (which are less toxic). Examples of other soluble calcium oxalate-containing plants include: star fruit and the shamrock plant. In general, soluble calcium oxalate poisoning is more commonly associated with large animals (from livestock chronically grazing). However, when ingested in large enough quantities in small animals, it can result in poisoning in dogs, cats, and even humans.

Soluble calcium oxalates are present in varying degrees in all parts of the plant. When soluble oxalate salts are absorbed from the gastrointestinal tract, they bind with body's calcium, resulting in a sudden drop in calcium. Rarely, acute renal failure can be seen from ingestion of plants or fruit containing these soluble oxalate crystals. Clinical signs of this type of poisoning include drooling, inappetance, vomiting, diarrhea, lethargy, weakness, tremors, bloody urine, and changes in thirst and urination."



More Resources:

https://extension.usu.edu/files/publications/publication/HG_Vegetables_2011-01pr.pdf

<http://store.msuextension.org/publications/YardandGarden/MT200006AG.pdf>

<http://urbanext.illinois.edu/veggies/rhubarb.cfm>

<http://www.petpoisonhelpline.com/poison/rhubarb/>

<http://www.rhubarb-central.com/>