

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

Rhubarb's water content is among the highest of all common vegetable crops. It contains few calories, so it may be useful in low calorie diets. Nutritionally, rhubarb is a poor source of vitamins or minerals, but its unusual flavor, texture, and 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 planting. Using 50 to 100 pounds of barnyard manure or similar organic material per 100 square feet of garden area is beneficial. Rhubarb is a perennial that should be located next to the garden area where it will not be disturbed by yearly tilling.

## Fertilization

Rhubarb should be fertilized well before planting. Later, fertilizer can only be applied to the soil surface. If you do not have the soil tested, use a fertilizer labeled 11-15-11 or 10-20-10. Apply 2 cups per 100 square feet of garden space and work it into the garden plot before planting. If neither of these fertilizers is available, choose a product with a second number larger than the other two and apply according to label directions.

Each year, fertilize established plantings with a 11-15-10 or 10-20-10 product, applying  $\frac{3}{4}$  cup of fertilizer per plant as soon as growth begins in the spring. Avoid placing fertilizer directly on the crown, and scratch the fertilizer into the soil around each plant.

After the spring harvest season, make a second application using a fertilizer composed mostly of nitrogen, such as nitrate of soda (16-0-0). Apply  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup per plant. High-nitrogen lawn fertilizers such as a 27-3-3, 30-3-4, 29-5-4, or similar can be used as long as they do not contain weed killers or weed preventers. The rate for these products is  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup per plant. The second fertilization provides nitrogen to promote summer foliage growth.

If phosphorus levels are high according to the soil test, use the recommended amount of the postharvest fertilizer both times, substituting it for the high-phosphorus early spring application.

## Varieties

There are relatively few rhubarb varieties compared with other vegetable crops. The most common varieties in Kansas are Canada Red and McDonald. Other varieties with large red stalks include Valentine and Ruby. Strawberry and Cherry varieties are particularly desirable because of their brilliant red stalks. An older variety, Victoria, produces large stalks that are green. Many gardeners or garden centers carry unnamed plant varieties. Although they may be acceptable, it is best to have an indication of the type of stalk and overall productivity before choosing to grow them.

## Planting

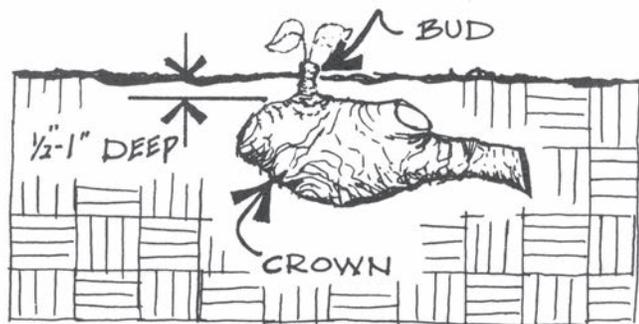
Rhubarb should be planted in the early spring. In Kansas, the suggested planting time is mid March to early April, about the same time as Irish potatoes. Rhubarb is propagated by planting pieces of older crowns or roots. The pieces are taken from dormant crowns that are three years old or older. Crowns can be purchased from garden stores or seed dealers or dug from a healthy, established planting during the dormant season. If digging your own crowns, split them into pieces, each containing one large "eye" or bud. A crown should produce about four to eight pieces suitable for planting.

Crowns should be kept moist until planted and be solid, not spongy. Plant rhubarb in a shallow trench with each bud about  $\frac{1}{2}$  to 1 inch below the soil surface. Plants should be placed 2 to 3 feet apart in the row with 4 to 5 feet of space between rows if planting more than one row. Fill in the trench to cover the crowns, firming the soil around them. Make sure not to leave a depression along the row, which prevents excess water from draining away quickly. In heavy soils, you can hill or mound the soil around the plants to improve drainage. Rhubarb with "wet feet" or roots that stand too long in water, can die due to crown rot.

## Rejuvenating an Older Planting

Rhubarb productivity declines after 5 to 10 years. Plants can be rejuvenated by digging up and dividing crowns in the early spring, cutting older crowns into sections with a

sharp cleaver or axe and leaving at least one bud or eye per root section. Highly productive plantings may need to be rejuvenated more often. Follow the planting instructions given on the previous page, placing crowns ½ to 1 inch below the surface as shown below.



## Cultivation and Care

Weeds can be controlled with shallow cultivation around plants. Apply mulch to rhubarb plantings to reduce weed growth and prevent moisture loss and add another layer of mulch in the fall for winter protection. To promote early growth in the spring, pull back the mulch to allow the soil to warm. Later in the season, work the mulch into the soil around the plants. In the spring, snails and slugs may collect under the mulch layer. Check the plot periodically for such pests, removing the mulch if they appear.

## Harvesting

Probably the most common reason for a lack of success in growing rhubarb is harvesting too much or too long. Like other perennial plants, rhubarb draws on food reserves accumulated during the previous season for vigor and strength. No rhubarb should be harvested the first year, and only a few stalks taken the second year. This will establish a planting that lasts for many years.

Rhubarb is one of the first vegetables to appear in the spring and a welcome sign of garden crops to come. For an established planting, the harvest season lasts about 8 weeks and begins as soon as stalks are large enough to

use. Harvest only the largest and best stalks, which should break off easily if pulled slightly to one side. After the harvest season, allow remaining stalks to grow and develop foliage for a healthy crop the following year.

## Seed stalks

It is not unusual for rhubarb to produce large, yellow seedstalks during the growing season. These seedstalks should be broken off and removed as soon as they form. Removal allows plants to store more food in the crowns and roots, which encourages leaf growth.

## Use

Rhubarb can be used in a variety of recipes. Gardeners should be aware that rhubarb leaves contain oxalic acid and can cause lesions in the mouth if eaten. Only the stalks, also called petioles, should be eaten. Rhubarb stalks should be stored in the vegetable area of the refrigerator and kept moist until used.

## Rhubarb Problems

**Insects.** The rhubarb curculio can damage rhubarb plants. This rust-colored beetle bores into rhubarb stalks or crowns. Another insect known as the stalk borer causes similar problems. Controlling grassy and large-stemmed weeds, especially dock, around the garden plot reduces hosts for these insects. There are no insecticides effective for control of these insects that are approved for use on rhubarb.

**Diseases.** Crown rot is a serious disease that can cause rhubarb plantings to decline. To avoid problems, purchase disease-free crowns rather than using starts from a neighbor. Plant rhubarb in well-drained soil if possible. If not, planting on a mound to encourage water to run off quickly may help. Fungicides have not been shown to be effective in preventing this disease.

For more information on rhubarb and other home gardening topics, contact your local K-State Research and Extension office and ask about the following publications:

- S51, Kansas Garden Guide
- L41, Recommended Vegetable Varieties

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Revised from original by Charles W. Marr, vegetable crops specialist, retired.

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