

---

Rhubarb is a perennial vegetable that grows well in most of the United States. Rhubarb is used in pies, tarts and sauces. Rhubarb should be planted at the end of one side of the garden where it will not be disturbed since it may be productive for five years or more. A half-dozen plants will provide enough rhubarb for a family of four.

### When to Plant

Plant or divide rhubarb roots in early spring while the plants are dormant. Planting seeds is not recommended except in extremely southern areas of the United States.

### Spacing & Depth

Plant the roots with the crown bud 2 inches below the surface of the soil. Space the roots 36 to 48 inches apart in rows 3 to 4 feet apart. Good garden drainage is essential in growing rhubarb. Planting on raised beds ensures against rotting of the crown. Working plenty of well-rotted manure or compost into the rhubarb bed before planting greatly increases production.



Old roots may be dug and divided to make new plantings. Cut the roots into four to eight pieces. Each piece must have at least one strong bud. To improve vigor and leaf size, many gardeners divide the old plants and establish a new planting after at least 5 years of full harvest. Plantings older than this tend to begin crowding themselves out. Dig the roots of the most vigorous, healthy plants to establish a new bed the spring before the old planting is to be discarded.

### Care

Cultivate shallowly as often as necessary to remove weeds. Apply a complete garden fertilizer before growth begins in the spring and side-dress with a high-nitrogen fertilizer in late June. Except in poorly drained sites, organic mulches help moderate soil temperature and moisture. Irrigate during extended dry periods. An application of manure or compost is beneficial in late fall or early winter. Do not cover the crowns.

### Harvesting

Do not harvest rhubarb during the first year of planting. Newly set plants need all their foliage to build a strong root system. Stalks may be harvested for 1 or 2 weeks during the second year and for 8 to 10 weeks (a full harvest season) during the third and subsequent years. Harvest in the fall only when the plants are to be discarded the next season. To harvest, pull the leafstalks from the plant and trim off the leaf blades. The leaf blades contain large amounts of oxalic acid and should not be eaten. To keep the plants healthy, vigorous and producing well, remove only about one-third of the leaves from a plant at any one time.

If seedstalks and flowers develop during the spring and summer, cut them from the base of the plant as soon as they appear and discard them. Vegetatively propagated, named varieties usually have been selected to produce fewer seedstalks than cheaper, seed-produced plants. The petioles (leafstalks) are of the highest quality (maximum color, flavor and tenderness) in early spring. They should be crisp and fairly thick. Yield

and quality are highest if petioles that have just reached full size are harvested before any coarse fiber can develop.

## Common Problems

**Rhubarb curculio**, a snout beetle, bores into the stalks, crowns and roots of rhubarb plants. It also attacks wild dock, a weed that is prevalent in many areas of the country. Destroy all wild dock growing around the garden. Treat the base of plants with a suggested insecticide. Burn badly infected rhubarb plant parts in July after the beetles have laid their eggs.

---

### **Q. A severe freeze has damaged my rhubarb. Can I safely eat the leafstalks?**

A. No. The leafstalks will be of poor texture and flavor and oxalic acid may have migrated from the leaf blades.

### **Q. Why do my rhubarb plants send up seedstalks and produce small leaves and leafstalks? The petioles are not as large as they have been in previous years.**

A. These conditions may result from excessive crowding, old plants or low soil fertility. Allow more space between rhubarb plants, divide parent plants and fertilize regularly. Some seed-propagated plants produce small foliage and many seedstalks even under the best conditions. Buy only named, vegetatively propagated varieties; or get divisions from another gardener who has a high-quality planting.