DIVISION OF AGRICULTURE
RESEARCH & EXTENSION
University of Arkansas System

Agriculture and Natural Resources

FSA6076

Home Gardening Series

Rhubarb

Craig R. Andersen
Associate Professor and Extension Specialist - Vegetables

Environment

Light – sunny
Soil – well-drained, deep loam
Fertility – medium to rich
pH – 5.8 to 7.5
Temperature – cool
Moisture – moist

Culture

Planting – plant roots 2 to 4 inches below soil surface in spring
Spacing – 3 feet x 4 feet
Hardiness – hardy
Fertilizer – medium

Rhubarb – *Rheum rhabarbarum*

Rhubarb is a native of Asia, where it still frequently grows wild. It is extensively cultivated as a food plant and sometimes as an ornamental plant in temperate portions of Europe and America.

Rhubarb (also known as pie plant) is a very hardy perennial garden vegetable. It does not grow well in all parts of Arkansas. Cool, north-facing slopes are the best sites to plant rhubarb. Although considered a vegetable, rhubarb is used as a fruit in pies, tarts and sauces. Since it yields for five years or longer in the same location, plant rhubarb at the end or on one side of the garden where it will not be disturbed. A half dozen plants should provide enough rhubarb for most families.

Cultural Practices

Planting Time

Plant rhubarb roots in early spring. Planting seeds is not recommended because it may take too long for the plants to become established and the seedlings would not come true to color and size.

Spacing and Depth of Planting

Plant roots with the crown bud 2 inches below the surface of the soil. Space 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 crowns will not rot.

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 five or more years of full harvest. 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

Fertilize each year and cultivate shallowly as often as necessary to remove weeds. Apply a complete garden fertilizer in early spring or side-dress fertilizer in late June.

Arkansas Is Our Campus

Visit our web site at:
https://www.uaex.uada.edu

Cultivars

Crop	Cultivar	Plants Per 100 Feet of Row	Disease Resistance or Tolerance	Remarks
Rhubarb	MacDonald (MacDonald's Canadian Red)	50	Wilt Rot Root Rot (resistant)	Large, deep red stalks. Vigorous and upright growth.
	Tilden (Tilden's Canada Red)	50		A strain that has been selected for many years by the Tilden family. Not as upright as MacDonald.
	Victoria	50		Heirloom cultivar from England.

Irrigate during extended dry periods. An application of manure or compost is beneficial in late fall and early winter. Do not cover the crowns.

Harvesting

Do not harvest rhubarb during the first year of planting. Stalks may be harvested for one or two weeks during the second year and for eight to ten weeks (a full harvest season) during the third and subsequent years. Harvest in the fall only when the plants are to be discarded 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.

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. The petioles (leafstalks) are of highest quality (maximum color, flavor and tenderness) in early spring. They should be crisp and fairly thick.

You can grow tender stalks out of season by "forcing" rhubarb at home in late winter and early spring. Forcing is most successful with large diameter roots. Dig the roots of plants that are to be forced (three-year-old plants are best) and allow them to freeze on top of the ground. Keep excess soil on the roots to prevent damage from subzero freezing. After the roots are thoroughly chilled, take them indoors to a warm, dark place (a cellar or cold frame) and cover them with peat, soil or sawdust. Place the crowns close together and keep moist. The ideal temperature is 55 to 60 degrees F. Harvest when stalks are 12 to 18 inches high. The leaves will be small, and the petioles will be tender and uniformly bright pink. The harvest period for forced roots is about one month.

Common Problems

Rhubarb curculio, a snout beetle, bores into the stalk, crowns and roots of rhubarb plants. Destroy all wild dock growing around the garden, as it is difficult to separate from the rhubarb and attracts rhubarb curculio. Treat base of plants with suggested insecticide. Burn badly infested rhubarb plants in July after the beetles have laid their eggs.

Frequently Asked Questions

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 my result from excessive crowding, old plants or low soil fertility. Allow more spacing between rhubarb plants, divide parent plants and fertilize regularly.

Q. Why aren't my rhubarb stalks red?

A. Rhubarb develops color best with cool nights. In the southern states, the nights remain too warm for good color development. Plant on north-facing slopes and give it partial shade.

DR. CRAIG R. ANDERSEN is associate professor and Extension specialist - vegetables, Horticulture Department, University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture, Fayetteville.

FSA6076-PD-5-11RV

Pursuant to 7 CFR § 15.3, the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture offers all its Extension and Research programs and services (including employment) without regard to race, color, sex, national origin, religion, age, disability, marital or veteran status, genetic information, sexual preference, pregnancy or any other legally protected status, and is an equal opportunity institution.