



Rhubarb Culture Tips

Rhubarb, often called pie-plant, is a herbaceous perennial. The edible portion of the plant is the large tender leaf stalk harvested in late spring or early summer when other fruits are not yet ripe. Homeowners should set rhubarb plants with other perennial crops along the side of the garden in an out-of-the-way place, but where the plants can receive full sun and can be cultivated. Two to three plants usually are adequate for the average family. The leaf blades of the rhubarb plant contain oxalic acid and, therefore, are not edible either raw or cooked. Poisoning has been reported from eating the leaf blades of rhubarb plants.

As long as drainage is good, rhubarb grows well throughout Indiana. Once growth starts in the spring, the climatic conditions may determine, in part, the color of the leaf stalks, particularly the older cultivars. If the weather is cool, the stalks develop a good pink to red color, which gradually fades as the weather becomes warmer.

When new plantings are made, the soil should be deeply plowed or rototilled, then worked into a fairly level planting bed. Broadcast about ½ cup of 12-12-12 fertilizer per 10 sq. ft. of bed area, then work it into the soil. Place the crowns 3 ft. apart in shallow furrows so that crowns will be only 2 in. below the surface. Space the crowns so that each plant will have 12-15 sq. ft.

Each season after harvesting is completed, side-dress each plant with ¼ cup. high nitrogen fertilizer such as 30-10-10 to encourage top growth. It is important that the plant build up a good reserve of food during the growing season. This reserve food, which is stored in the root system, improves the quality and yield of next season's early spring crop.

Rhubarb is very hardy and can be planted in the spring as soon as the ground can be easily worked and planted. Choose crowns that have at least two large buds. You can propagate your own plants by dividing the crown of a healthy plant, preferably in early spring before new growth begins. Leave as many roots as possible with each division. For two years after planting, allow all leaves to grow to produce food for good crowns and roots. Harvesting before the third season reduces the stalk size and overall yield of the plants. During the third season of growth, stalks may be harvested for a four-week period during the spring. During the following years, harvest for 8 to 10 weeks in spring. Allow the leaves to develop after this period so that plants can produce and store food reserves for the next year's growth. Do not remove more than 2/3 of the developed stalks from any plant at one time.

Infertile soil, extreme heat or cold, drought, or long days that expose the plants to too much light may cause bolting which results in the production of seed stalks. The seed stalks should be cut out as soon as they are formed because they reduce the vigor of the plant.

Information taken from Purdue Extension Bulletin HO-97
For more information: www.hort.purdue.edu/ext/conhort.html