

Rhubarb

March 2017

Rhubarb is a vegetable that we choose to use as a fruit for our puddings. Everyone should be aware that only the stems are used and the leaves are discarded as they are poisonous and contain oxalic acid. The usual advice is that the leaves should not be composted either, however small quantities may not be detrimental to your compost.

Many allotment holders grow rhubarb. Every five years or so the enlarged crowns will need to be rejuvenated by splitting the crown into smaller pieces and replanting them in a revised position. This can be done carefully with a sharpened spade in winter (Nov-Mar). Make your cuts vertically down into the root so that at least one bud is retained with each piece. Positioning, then applying your full weight to the spade with skill and care should do the trick.

For those without rhubarb, but desiring of their own, this could be their opportunity to acquire a crown from a neighbour.

Planting

Choose a full sun or partial shade site for planting.

Ensure that the chosen position has been prepared by digging and forking over and the soil is moisture retentive but has good drainage in wet weather. Add compost and well rotted manure. Plant crowns at about 80cm spacing, an inch below the surface, bud just visible.

Water in well and make sure to water in dry spells.

Cultivation

Cultivation is easy.

After planting out mulch with compost and/or well rotted manure every Feb/Mar.

Minimise, or resist, your picking in the first year after planting to allow the plant to bulk up and establish. Make sure to water in dry spells. Generally tidy up dying leaves.

Harvesting/Picking

Rhubarb is different to most cultivated plants in that the stems are harvested before the plant goes through to flowering maturity. Harvesting starts in March and stops in early July then flowering may start. Cut out the flowering stems and discard to prevent them taking energy from the crown. A second picking season may follow but the stems will not be as tender as the first. Pick from the available stems at a rate of no more than half of those available at any one time on each crown.

The pulling technique is to hold the stem firmly at its base, twisting as you pull to prevent the stem snapping part way up.

Forcing

Earlier crops can be had by “forcing”. This is a technique whereby the whole crown is kept covered to raise the temperature and keep all light excluded.

This is a long established technique employed for years in the “Rhubarb Triangle” in West Yorkshire near Wakefield taking advantage of their local climate and otherwise waste materials like shoddy. There are also special outdoor clay pots for this, but their cost is close to a lifetime's purchases of early rhubarb. Try using an old upturned dustbin but remember to weigh/tie it down for windy weather.

Varieties

Timperley Early - the earliest

Victoria - slightly later and good looking

Culinary

Rhubarb is quite versatile. Crumbles, Stewed with custard or Jam come immediately to mind with/without flavour enhancing of Orange zest, Ginger, Rosemary etc. See the many recipes on the internet.

More Information

<https://www.rhs.org.uk/advice/grow-your-own/vegetables/rhubarb?type=v>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhubarb_Triangle

<https://www.bbcgoodfood.com/recipes/collection/rhubarb>

JBS