

Growing up, my father always had rhubarb growing in his garden for mom who occasionally added the stalks to strawberry pies. The saying that what parents do in moderation their children practice in excess, could certainly apply to my exuberance and use of our rhubarb, as I love to make rhubarb custard pie for breakfast, rhubarb strawberry pie and rhubarb cobbler for lunch and dinner, stewed rhubarb for all occasions, and rhubarb sauce for pancakes, waffles, and ice cream throughout the spring, summer, and fall season. I even freeze it for winter use, as well.


Rhubarb is a prolific, herbaceous perennial vegetable which is the first spring garden plant to provide food ready for consumption. As early as the beginning of April, this plant is ready to be harvested, continuing all the way through September. Although the leaves are toxic, the stalks are rich in vitamin C. Besides being healthy, the plants themselves are beautiful, making them a wonderful addition to any vegetable or flower bed, and even grouped together make a striking bed. At maturity, the lovely frilly leaves actually reach a foot or more in width while the stalks grow up to 18 inches long and 1 to 2 inches in diameter making the entire plant as large as 4 feet wide and 3 feet high. Optimum growth arrives usually by the third year or so and after four years can be divided into additional plants. And to make this plant even more desirable, it is relatively disease and insect free.

Rhubarb grows from rhizomes and is best started from roots, available at hardware and farm supply stores in late winter and early spring. Although I prefer the crimson red stalks appearance, green rhubarb is stronger and more vigorous than the red, so we have both. Rhubarb prefers fertile, well-drained soil high in organic matter, so prepare your beds with horse manure or compost. Plant your roots 24 to 36 inches apart with rows 3 to 4 feet apart. Do not harvest the first year because the plant requires nourishment from the leaves. Fertilize in the spring. The plant completely disappears for the winter and appears again in spring as it grows from the root. After 4 years you can divide the plant either in the spring or in the fall. Being careful not to damage the crown, divide between the buds, making 4 to 8 divisions. Plant each as you did the original plant.

To harvest, selectively pull individual stalks which are firm and glossy, taking from different sides of the plant so that your plant retains its lovely shape. The stalks naturally release themselves from the crown when pulled, making a clean sever from the plant. After the desired amount is pulled, just whack off the leaves with a sharp knife directly over your compost pile. Yes, you can add the rhubarb leaves to your compost pile without fear of its poisonous leaves contaminating your compost because the oxalic acid quickly decomposes, neutralizing their toxicity.