

Rhubarb

by Pat Stachon

There is a time in the spring when I anxiously await the arrival of rhubarb. A few weeks ago while touring my yard bundled in winter garb, trudging on top the snow, I found some beautiful red buds emerging from the wet soggy ground at the edge of the veggie garden. What joy! Rhubarb! Spring is coming after all!

The rhubarb in our gardens today, technically a vegetable, came from immigrants in the late 1700's and early 1800's. Rhubarb's popularity came from the availability of sugar via the Caribbean. There was lots of it and settlers did not think twice about using cups or pounds of sugar for their pies, preserves, and wines. Rhubarb lovers should plant a bed of red for spring enjoyment and green for winter use. Once established rhubarb is an undemanding plant, and will increase in size every year, and you will have enough for the neighbourhood in no time. Divide your plant every 5-10 years. Just dig up the outside edge, take a hunk and plant.

The stalks are edible but the leaves are not. They contain a large concentration of oxalates. Garden rhubarb requires frosty winters (we have plenty of those) to jump start spring growth. It will live many years in a well-drained area preferring sandy loam. Rhubarb roots will rot if planted in an area with poor drainage. Hardy in our area rhubarb will thrive in rich soil with a yearly addition of well-rotted manure, and 6 hours of sun each day.

Pests and Diseases are rare in home grown rhubarb

Pick the stalks when they are 20 cm or 8 inches long picking the thickest stems with fully developed leaves. Slender stalks should remain on plant to replenish root stalks. Cut off the flowers that bloom during the summer to energize the plant

To remove stalks hold each stem low down and twist sharply while pulling upward. If stalks are cut with a knife there is a risk of fungal infection at the entry.

The leaves can be composted with out harm as they break down quickly and easily.

Enjoy chopped rhubarb at its peak, in the spring in your favourite recipe; tarts, muffins, stewed, preserves, and mouth-watering rhubarb pie. It's a northern spring tradition. Remember, rhubarb also freezes very well.