



Rhubarb

Rheum sp.

Rhubarb plants are perennial and are not difficult to grow. With the proper care, your rhubarb will provide a tasty and ornamental addition to the vegetable garden.

If you're growing your rhubarb by seed or with seedlings, they will need to be left for about 2 or 3 years before you can use the crop. Therefore, the most popular method is to plant them as a crown. Rhubarb crowns are available for purchase in winter through to early spring.

How to grow:

Choose a sunny or part sun position. Make sure your soil has good drainage, as your rhubarb will not survive in boggy conditions. Prepare the bed with organic matter such as compost, well-rotted cow manure and blood and bone.

Dig a hole for a single plant or a trench if you're planting larger numbers. Plant your crowns about 1-1.5m apart and cover the top of each crown with a layer of soil around 1-5cm deep. Firm the soil after planting but keep it loose directly over the top of the crown. Water-in well. If you're short on space, you can also grow rhubarb in a large pot such as a half wine barrel.

Keep the rhubarb well-watered during the warmer months and make sure the area remains free of weeds. Remove seed stalks as soon as you see them by cutting them off at the base. Apply an all-purpose fertiliser and/or organic matter during spring.

Refrain from harvesting during the first year so that the crown can develop a strong root system. You may harvest the second year, when stalks are 20-30cm long. Pull the largest stalks downwards and sideways from the outside of the clump, always leaving at least 2 to 4 stems in the centre of the clump to keep the plant functioning. You can cut stalks at the base if the stems aren't coming away from the plant with ease. The harvesting time typically runs for 8 to 10 weeks.

If your stems are becoming spindly, apply fertiliser and discontinue harvesting until the plant builds up again. If your rhubarb is not red enough for your liking, try adding some extra potassium (potash). Don't worry if the rhubarb stems are still green, as they are still sweet to eat and some plants will stay green even in good soils.

Mark the plants that have produced red stems before they die down, so that when you divide the crowns in late winter to early spring you can replant the pieces that produce red stems. It is best to divide rhubarb every 3 to 4 years.

Note: Unlike the delicious stalks, rhubarb leaves are poisonous and should never be eaten.