

# Growing Rhubarb in Montana



*Fresh rhubarb sauce or pie is a delightful substitute for fresh fruit in late spring or early summer when other fruits are not yet in season. Rhubarb is easy to grow and will stand considerable neglect and still be there the following spring. The large heart-shaped leaves and red-tinted stalks of the rhubarb plant are very ornamental and are an interesting addition to the perennial garden.*

Growing vegetables in Montana is tough, unless you grow rhubarb. This hardy perennial tolerates Montana's cold winters and dry climate and is a good source of vitamin C and iron.

## Soils

Rhubarb does best in slightly acid soils with a pH between 6.0 and 6.8, but it will tolerate the somewhat more alkaline Montana soils. It will grow in almost any type of soil but is highly productive on fertile, well-drained soils high in organic matter. Rhubarb prefers to be planted in a full sun location.

## Planting

Rhubarb plants are usually propagated by dividing the crowns in late fall or early spring. Take care to leave as much root as possible with each eye or bud. Plants from such crown divisions are preferred to plants raised from seed because they seldom equal the production or quality of the named rhubarb varieties. To prepare the planting bed, dig holes two feet deep and two feet wide and space them three feet apart in all directions. Fill the bottom of each hole with a six inch layer of compost or well rotted manure. Mix top soil that was dug out of each hole with equal amounts of compost or manure and fill the hole with this mixture to a depth of one foot. Place the root piece in each hole so that the top, where the plant buds are located, sits 3-4 inches below the soil surface. Tamp the soil firmly around the roots and fill each hole with the soil mixture until level with the surrounding soil. In the average garden, rhubarb is usually planted at one side of the garden where it will not be disturbed by the plow or incorporated into a perennial bed. Irrigate freely when active top growth indicates that roots are growing.

## Dividing Rhubarb Plants

It may be necessary to divide and reset your rhubarb plants about every four to six years to keep the bed in vigorous condition. If not divided, plants may become too large and stalks may become thin and more numerous than desired. Do this renewal work in the fall after the foliage has died or in the early spring before new shoots emerge. Dig the crowns and, using a sharp spade or shovel, cut the crown into sections between the large buds. Crown pieces should be as large as possible leaving at least one bud on each crown section and 3-4 buds undisturbed in the old crown. Protect new crowns from drying or freezing if they are not to be planted immediately. Before replanting, discard crown pieces that are damaged or rotted. Portions removed may be replanted to enlarge your rhubarb bed or make wonderful gifts for your gardening friends.

**Harvesting Rhubarb**— Two or three rhubarb plants are usually adequate for the average family. Permit plants to grow 2 full seasons before harvesting. The plant uses food from the leaves to nourish the roots and enlarge the crown. This will ensure a strong root system. During the next spring you may harvest the leaf stalks for 4-5 weeks; older, huskier plants will take up to 8 weeks of pulling. Harvest stalks by grasping near the base and pulling sideways and outward; cutting with a knife will leave stubs that will decay. Stop harvesting when slender leaf stalks appear. Never remove all of the leaves from a single plant, doing so may deplete the plant of sufficient nutrients to over-winter the roots. Remove seed stalks when they appear, as they are not ornamental and they reduce the yield and vitality of the plant.

**Caution!** The leaves of the rhubarb plant, which contain oxalic acid, are not edible, either raw or cooked. Poisoning has been reported from eating the leaf blades of this plant. Eat only the stalks.



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## **Fertilizing**

Use no fertilizer in the planting year. Beginning in the second year, side dress each plant with a half pound of a complete fertilizer such as 16-16-16 just as the petioles first appear. Continue this practice each spring and fall when the leaves have died down but before the ground has frozen. Adding a 2-4" mulch around the plants will keep the weeds under control and will help to retain moisture.

## **Pests and Diseases**

Rhubarb is not usually seriously affected by insect pests or diseases. There are a few, however, of which you should be aware. "Red Leaf" is a bacterial root and crown rot. Examination of the crown and root area often reveals a chocolate brown discoloration accompanied by root cavities. The most visible symptom is the development of red leaves on infected plants. This is transmitted from transplanting infected crowns. New crowns must not be replanted in areas where the disease has previously been observed. Insects may move the bacteria from infected to uninfected plants. Therefore good insect management will reduce localized spread. Several foliar diseases including powdery and downy mildew, gray mold, and various fungal leaf spots are known to occur on rhubarb. However, due to Montana's general dry climate they are of little importance.

## **Using Rhubarb**

Rhubarb has a delicious, tart taste perfect for pies, preserves and sauces. Combine with raspberries and strawberries for a delicious summer treat. For year round enjoyment, rhubarb stalks can be washed, diced and frozen for winter use. Pack raw or blanch for one minute in boiling water; cool in ice water, drain and pack unsweetened or use a syrup or sugar pack.

## **Varieties We Carry**

**Canada Red**—this high quality cultivar has small, thick, tender petioles.

## **RECIPES**

Recipes courtesy of [www.epicurious.com](http://www.epicurious.com)

### **Rhubarb Raspberry Pie**

Pastry Dough  
1 1/2 pounds trimmed rhubarb  
1 c. plus 2 Tbsp. sugar  
1/2 tsp. cinnamon  
3 Tbsp. cornstarch  
3 Tbsp. fresh lemon juice  
1 1/2 c. raspberries  
1 large egg  
1 Tbsp. milk

Divide dough into 2 pieces (1 piece should be slightly smaller than the other). Chill larger dough piece, wrapped in plastic wrap. On a lightly floured surface with a lightly floured rolling pin roll out smaller piece of dough into a 10-inch round (about 1/2 inch thick).

Transfer round to a large baking sheet and chill, covered. Roll out remaining dough into an 11-inch round (about 1/2 inch thick) and stack it on top of first round. Chill pastry rounds, loosely covered with plastic wrap, at least 1 hour, or until firm. Cut enough rhubarb crosswise into 1/2-inch slices to measure 4 cups. In a 3-quart kettle stir together 3 cups rhubarb, 1 cup sugar, and cinnamon and cook over moderate heat, stirring constantly, until sugar is melted, about 6 minutes. In a small bowl stir together cornstarch and lemon juice. Add cornstarch mixture to rhubarb mixture and boil, stirring constantly, until rhubarb is thickened, about 5 minutes, and transfer mixture to a bowl. Cool mixture to room temperature, about 30 minutes. Fold raspberries and remaining cup rhubarb into mixture until just combined. Chill rhubarb filling, covered, at least 30 minutes, or until cold.

Preheat oven to 425°F. In a small bowl whisk together egg and milk to make an egg wash. Fit 11-inch round of dough into a 9-inch (1-quart) glass pie plate and trim with scissors, leaving a 1/2-inch overhang. Spoon rhubarb filling into shell, smoothing top, and brush edge of crust with egg wash. Drape remaining pastry round over filling and trim, leaving a 1/2-inch overhang. Crimp edge decoratively. With a sharp small knife score a decorative pattern on crust and brush crust evenly with some egg wash. Sprinkle crust with remaining 2 tablespoons sugar.

Bake on a baking sheet in middle of oven 35 minutes, or until crust is golden brown and cooked through. (If pastry gets too brown too quickly, tent pie with foil.) Transfer pie to a rack. Cool at least 1 hour to set filling. Serve pie with ice cream. Serves 8.

### **Rhubarb Raspberry Sauce**

Can be prepared in 45 minutes or less.

1/2 c. sugar  
1/2 c. water  
3/4 pound fresh rhubarb, trimmed and cut into 1/4-inch-thick slices (2 cups total)  
1 c. picked-over fresh raspberries, quartered

In a saucepan simmer sugar and water until sugar is dissolved. Add rhubarb and simmer, stirring occasionally, 5 minutes. Transfer mixture to a bowl to cool and stir in raspberries. Sauce may be made 1 day ahead and chilled, covered. Bring sauce to room temperature before serving. Makes 1-1/2 cups.

### **Rhubarb-Raspberry Jam**

This jam has a good, concentrated flavor: The only liquid comes from the rhubarb and berries interacting with sugar and lemon juice. The quick-to-prepare jam also makes a nice filling for tarts.

4 c. 1-inch pieces fresh rhubarb (about 1 1/2 pounds)  
2 c. sugar  
1 Tbsp. fresh lemon juice  
1 1/2 pint basket raspberries  
1/2 tsp. Ground cardamom

Combine rhubarb pieces, sugar and fresh lemon juice in heavy large Dutch oven. Cover and refrigerate until juices form, stirring occasionally, at least 8 hours or overnight.

Bring rhubarb mixture to simmer over medium heat, stirring until sugar dissolves. Increase heat to high and boil until rhubarb mixture thickens slightly, about 5 minutes. Add raspberries and boil until mixture is thick, stirring occasionally, about 6 minutes longer. Remove jam from heat. Stir in ground cardamom. Cool jam completely. (Jam can be made 1 week ahead. Store in covered container in refrigerator.) Makes about 2 cups.



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