

For those who like the tart taste, the perennial vegetable rhubarb is a juicy addition to your vegetable garden. A native of Asia, rhubarb does well in our cool, Kansas springs.

Like celery and asparagus, it is the stem of the rhubarb plant that is eaten. Unlike the onion, where every portion of the plant is edible, rhubarb leaves are not fit for consumption. Rhubarb leaves contain oxalic acid and can cause lesions of the mouth as well as nausea. Fortunately, the leaves are easily removed leaving a fleshy stem perfect for jams and pies.

As with all perennials, site preparation is key to a healthy plant. Rhubarb plants tolerate a variety of soils but prefer a well-drained loamy soil. Incorporate a large amount of organic material (compost for example) and fertilize well before you plant. Soil test recommendations will give you exact fertilizer rates but in lieu of a test, you can apply 3/4 to 1 pound of 5-10-5 (or the equivalent) fertilizer per 100 square feet of garden space and plow into the garden plot before planting. Make sure your selected site is removed from your other vegetables which will require more soil disturbance (tilling, planting) than these perennials.

March to mid-April is the best time for planting rhubarb. This year, with our unusually cool spring, there is still time to plant. Rhubarb is propagated by crown, which can be purchased from a nursery or divided from a 3-year-old crown. Make sure if you're digging up rhubarb to divide that it is during the plants dormancy. Crowns can be planted in a trench, and should be spaced 2-3 feet apart. Buds should be no deeper than 1" below the soil.

Mulching new and established plants offers weed control as well as cold protection and prevention of water loss. In early spring mulch should be moved back to help warm the soil for early growth. Snails and slugs can be a rhubarb pest. If they are detected, removing the mulch will reduce their feeding.

An established planting should be fertilized each year using 4 to 5 pounds of 1-10-5 (or the equivalent) per 1,000 square feet broadcast over the plot and worked into the soil early in the season before growth begins. Adding 2 to 3 pounds of ammonium nitrate per 1,000 square feet over the plot after the spring harvest season will provide nitrogen for vigorous summer foliage growth.

Harvest practices are key to the home gardener's success with rhubarb. The first year after planting, rhubarb should not be harvested at all. In year two, only harvest a few stalks to continue to allow the plant to establish. In the third and following years, begin harvest when stalks are a suitable size. Harvest only the largest stalks and only harvest for 8 weeks. For the remainder of the year allow the plant to grow undisturbed.

After 5-10 years, rhubarb productivity will drop. Once this occurs, dig and divide crowns in the early spring by cutting them with a sharp cleave or axe, leaving one bud per root section. These now become new crowns ready for planting.

Some years, your rhubarb plant may produce a large, yellow seedstalk. These should be removed as soon as they form in order to push the plant to produce more stalks.

The rhubarb curculio and the stalk borer are two pests known to tunnel into rhubarb stalks and crowns. Neither pest can be effectively controlled with pesticides so controlling grassy weeds in the area around your rhubarb plants is essential.

The only serious disease of rhubarb is crown rot. It will cause a decline in rhubarb plantings, so make sure to choose disease-free crowns. If rot symptoms appear at the base of the plants or crowns, apply fixed copper or captan as a drench to the crowns and surrounding soil.

For more information on this and other vegetables, download or print a free copy of the Kansas Garden Guide, available on ksre.ksu.edu today! The Kansas Garden Guide is also available for purchase (\$5) at the Shawnee County Extension Office.

Raised beds are an accessible, fun way to garden for all ages and abilities. Learn how raised beds can change your garden this spring! "Raised Bed Gardens" will be presented by Shawnee County Extension Master Gardener Terry Cobb. This free seminar will be at the Topeka and Shawnee County Library, on May 3rd at 7:00 pm in Marvin Auditorium 101C.