

Rhubarb

Rhubarb is a very popular garden vegetable grown in the northern tier of our country. Most Texas gardeners say that you cannot grow rhubarb here. However, by rethinking rhubarb culture, says Travis County Agriculture Extension Agent Skip Richter, Texans can grow a big enough crop of rhubarb to make a fine strawberry rhubarb pie. See <http://www.texasgardener.com/pastissues/julaug03/rhubarb.html>.

Our northern neighbors grow rhubarb as a perennial that is harvested in late spring and summer. In Texas, the heat of summer would be the death of any rhubarb plant. Therefore, it is best to plant rhubarb here in fall or winter, and harvest it all before the heat hits.

Choose a location in full sun. To prepare existing soil for rhubarb, mix in one of our *high quality composts*. The resulting blend should be about 50% compost, 50% soil. At the same time, mix in an organic *high nitrogen fertilizer*, and a *mineral supplement*. Rhubarb is susceptible to several fungal diseases in Texas, so consider incorporating a *beneficial streptomyces* product into the soil as a disease preventative. If you have shallow soil or poor drainage, make a raised bed for your rhubarb. Use a good prepared garden soil, and add all of the amendments listed above except for the compost.

Plant the transplant as you would any other plant. Mulch well throughout the root zone, but do not mulch within an inch or two of the plant. Rhubarb needs consistent moisture. Avoid a soggy soil, which could encourage stem and crown rot. Fertilize every 4 – 6 weeks with the same fertilizer as above. During a hard freeze, rhubarb should be protected. Cover your plants with our *Heavyweight Row Cover*, also known as frost cloth. Do not expect to have the deep-red stalks normally seen on the northern varieties of rhubarb. The mild winters and varieties available to the Texas gardener tend to have green, but equally delicious, stalks.

By March or April, it will be time to harvest! **Only the stems (stalks) are edible. The leaves contain potentially toxic levels of oxalic acid, and should not be eaten.** (Many foods, such as spinach, cabbage, beet tops and rhubarb stems, have small amounts of oxalic acid). The leaves should be removed from the harvested rhubarb stalk immediately. (They are safe to put into your compost pile!) Do not harvest stalks from frost-bitten leaves, either. Some sources say the oxalic acid crystals may migrate from the leaves to the soggy areas in the stem damaged by frost. Rhubarb stalks should be cooked before eaten, and are delicious in pies and sauces when plenty of sugar is added. A website recommended by Skip Richter for recipes is <http://www.rhubarbinfo.com/recipes>.

Rhubarb is a large and beautiful vegetable that should be given a chance by Texas gardeners. Enjoy your harvest! And if you happen to have a surplus of rhubarb-strawberry pie, the folks at the Natural Gardener sure love desserts!