

Guidelines for Rhubarb Planting & Growing

Climate and Growing Region

Rhubarb is a long-lived perennial that is very winter-hardy as well as fairly drought-tolerant, but it grows best in cooler climates that receive plenty of moisture. The northern US and Canada, and most of the Midwest, are good regions for rhubarb. Winter temperatures of 40°F or lower are required for dormancy and to stimulate bud break and spring growth. In spring and summer, stalks and leaves will continue to emerge as long as temperatures remain moderate. After a stretch of summer days with temperatures over 90°F, the plants will begin to appear dormant, and will only produce more foliage when the temperatures decrease again in late summer.

Preparing Your Site

Choose a site that gets full sun, unless you are in an area that gets extended periods of summer heat, in which case you should place them where they will receive some afternoon shade and where you can give them plenty of water. Rhubarb tolerates most soils but grows best on fertile, well-drained soils that are high in organic matter, and prefers a slightly acidic soil. Before you plant, the area should have had several months of good weed-control, including removal of perennial weeds. Amending the soil with compost or manure will be beneficial.

Receiving and Holding Plants before Planting

When your bare roots arrive, open the boxes immediately to check the plants. They should be firm, not slimy or mushy. A small amount of mold on the roots is harmless. It is best to plant them right away, but if that is not possible, you can keep them viable for a couple of weeks in a commercial cooler at 33-35°F, or for a few days in a cool and shady area where the temperatures will remain between 32 and 45 degrees F. If the air is dry, you may want to add some slightly moist sawdust or leaf mulch to the boxes.

You can also heel in the plants for longer storage by digging a trench outdoors or placing the roots in a container with soil or sand; cover them well with moist soil, sand or compost so that the roots are protected from air pockets. The temperatures where they are stored needs to be above freezing, but this method will protect the roots for a longer period from drying out.

Planting and Spacing

Space rhubarb plants 3 feet apart in rows that are at least 4 feet apart. The exact spacing between your rows will depend on the cultivating equipment you plan to use. Plant the pieces with the buds not more than 1 inch below the surface of the soil. If you have heavy soil, leave the buds just at the surface level. Firm the soil around the root, but not over the buds. Water well after planting.

Cultivation and Maintenance

Fertilize the plants with well-decayed compost, manure, or a balanced fertilizer about a month after planting and again each spring when they begin to grow. An established planting will also benefit from an additional fertilizer application after harvesting. Keeping the beds regularly watered and weeded the

first season will pay off in the long term. In following years, they may produce flower stalks, which should be removed in order to promote more vigorous growth of stalks.

Harvesting

During the planting year, do not harvest stalks so that these leaves can nourish the root for good growth. In the second year, you can take one light picking if the plants look vigorous, and in the third year you can harvest the entire plant.

You can harvest the stalks by grasping the stalks at the base and pulling them with a twisting motion (preferred), or by cutting them off at ground level, taking care not to cut into the crown.

An established planting can be harvested more than once in a season. However, you must water between cuttings, and discontinue harvesting if the new growth is coming in with thin stalks.

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