

RHUBARB

HOW TO GROW DELICIOUS RHUBARB

Rhubarb is often regarded as a slightly old-fashioned plant, but it is surprising how many rhubarb clumps are to be found in gardens. The plants can live for many years, which provides ample proof of how tough these plants really are.

Rhubarb seems set to have a revival in popularity and these days there's a lot more "Rhubarb awareness" around. Maybe it's something to do with the increasing interest in federation houses. Many people who have bought an older property have inherited an established clump of rhubarb and are wondering how best to look after it.

If it's more than a few years old the clump would really benefit from being lifted out of the ground and broken up. And if you are planning to do this, make sure you do it soon - late winter and early spring are the best times for dividing rhubarb.

Choose the best parts of the clump for replanting and discard the rest. The strongest pieces can be planted into new positions in the garden. Choose a sunny or lightly shaded spot and dig plenty of organic matter into the planting area.

Dynamic Lifter can also be mixed into the soil before planting. If you want to start off with new plants, this is the time of year to look for them in our Garden Centres. Called "crowns", these sections of dormant root come in a package and look as if they won't ever amount to much, but once planted, they start to grow rapidly. As soon as the leaves appear, begin applying organic mulch around the plant such as Bio-ganic (without directly touching the stems) and water regularly with a liquid plant food such as Thrive Rhubarb likes a fair amount of moisture around its roots but it definitely won't survive in boggy conditions. Soil should always be well drained, especially in winter.

When watering, apply water at the base of the plant - never directly over its leaves or stems - because rhubarb stems are prone to rots and rusts. When harvesting rhubarb, pick the largest stalks from the outside of the clump. Pull the stalk cleanly downwards and sideways. Always leave at least four stems in the centre of the clump - like any other plant, rhubarb needs some leaves to keep its food factory functioning.

Rhubarb has been regarded for centuries as a cure for constipation and is even mentioned for this purpose in Shakespeare's Macbeth. Most people, however, treat it as a straightforward and simple sweet dessert. Stew rhubarb lightly in a small amount of honey and lemon juice. Use as a filler for pies and tarts, or swirl through custard or ice cream.

Don't worry too much if your rhubarb stems are green, rather than red. Some rhubarb plants stubbornly stay green even in the best of soils and conditions.

One final word of warning: Rhubarb leaves are poisonous and should never ever be eaten.

This quality can be turned to your advantage however, by using the leaves to make a rhubarb spray for insect control. Boil rhubarb leaves with water - approximate ratio 1:10 - and add a small amount of soap (not detergent) to the mix.