

Rhubarb



Rhubarb is an attractive hardy perennial with large leaves and pink, red or greenish leaf stalks that are used as a dessert, often in pies and crumbles. Stems are usually picked in spring, but plants can be covered with pots to produce an early crop of blanched stalks in late winter. The flavour of rhubarb varies in sweetness depending on the age of the stems.

Keep rhubarb free of weeds by covering the ground with a mulch of composted manure but avoid burying the crown as it will rot. Cover the area above the roots with 100g per sq m (4oz per sq yard) of general-purpose fertiliser in March, and water regularly in dry spells to keep it moist and actively growing until autumn.

When the top growth dies back in autumn, remove the dead leaves to expose the crown to frost - this will help break dormancy and ensure a good crop of stalks the following year.

To get an earlier crop, you can force stems. To force stems, cover the crown with a traditional forcing jar, bucket or upturned pot in late winter, ensuring that all light is

blocked out. Forced stems are lighter-coloured and more tender than those grown in the open and are generally ready three weeks earlier.

Rhubarb needs an open, sunny site with moist, but free-draining soil as it hates being waterlogged in winter.

Do not harvest during the first year after planting as this will reduce vigour. Remove a few stems the next year, then up to a third or half from then on, leaving some to keep the plant in active growth. To remove, hold the stalk at the base and ease it out of the ground, aiming to avoid snapping it off. Although rhubarb stems remain palatable and usable through summer, it is best not to over crop the plant and cease pulling by June, or at least only remove a few stalks after then.

