

RHUBARB

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A rhubarb patch makes a good investment in your family's future, because once a few rhubarb plants have become established they multiply readily and their offspring can remain a part of your family's gardens through many generations

PLANTING To get it started, dig a trench about 3 feet wide and 8 inches deep. The bed will be in place for 5 years without being tilled or worked, so locate it in a place where it will be practical. And don't skimp on the organic material; get it started right, and you'll find it much easier to dig and separate the crowns five years down the road when the patch must be restored. Put about 4 inches of well-rotted manure or well-aged compost into the bottom of the trench, cover it with several inches of soil. Then using a sharp shovel, lever open a deep slit and set the crowns in a zig-zag pattern about 24 inches apart. Keep the growing point (where the leaf stalks come out of the root) just at the soil line. Then gently compress the soil around the root and water well.

GROWING Keep the bed well watered for the first summer while the roots are developing a strong connection with the soil. To keep it vigorous and productive after the first year, mulch the bed with compost or well-aged manure once a year in early spring. And keep it weeded.

HARVESTING Do not harvest any stalks the first year; the newly established crowns need to build up their strength. In subsequent years, harvest by tearing the stalk off, pulling sideways, away from the center of the plant. If you cut them with a knife, the stubs can get decayed and infected. The plants sprout in early spring; in the North, shortly after the snow melts. Begin harvesting as soon as the leaves first appear and continue until the stalks get too tough and stringy. Do not take more than half the stalks that come up or you'll drain the root's food reserves too much. The leaves are not edible because they contain huge amounts of oxalic acid. Laid around the plant, the oxalates in the leaf mulch act as an effective weed-killer. It is wise to cut off the plant's flower stalks as soon as they appear, allowing the plant to put more energy into storing food in its root system.

MAINTAINING THE BED The crowns divide steadily. If you want to harvest large, succulent stalks, this competition must be reduced. So, about every 5 years the roots must be dug, divided, and replanted in another spot. Do this in early spring, while the leaves are small, as soon as they begin to appear. First, deeply cut an 8" circle around the roots with a sharp shovel. This severs the surface feeder roots. Then, cut under the crowns 9-12 inches down. Then, levering up with that same shovel, lift the crown, and by hand, gently separate the crowns-there will be many. Do this without damaging the growing points. If the growing point on top of the crown is broken off, the root will die.