



Generations of Rhubarb

Sharing this bold perennial is
the key to its good health and vigor

BY MIKE GUERTIN

I fondly remember the sunny spring morning that my mother took me to my great-grandfather's farm when I was a young teenager. We were going to dig up some rhubarb to transplant to our home 30 miles away. Certainly not an exciting event in the life of most teens, but I loved the desserts my

mother could make with rhubarb; that, and I got the day out of school.

Rhubarb has always seemed to me an odd duck in the garden. It's a vegetable, botanically speaking, that's used as a fruit, horticulturally. It is a perennial that's easy to grow and care for, and it stays where you put it. And even if you don't care for the wonderful sweet-tart desserts that can be made from the stalks, rhubarb doubles as a great foliage plant in any landscape.

The rhubarb we were going to fetch from the farm was planted in the early 1940s as part of a victory garden my grandparents and great-grandfather cultivated. The original roots (called crowns) probably came from an even earlier family homestead somewhere in southern New England. No one had tended the farm in more than 20 years, and it was reverting to forest.

After all our work, I was disappointed when my mother said we couldn't pick any stalks from the rhubarb we had transplanted that day. We had to wait until the following year because the roots needed the energy. But the wait was worth it. We've enjoyed fresh rhubarb from that plant, and the additional ones my mother has propagated from it, for 20 years.

A Third Generation of Rhubarb

Now, after two decades, my mother is giving me some of my great-grandfather's rhubarb so I can plant it at my own house. In rhubarb's case, sharing is essential to good health, since its crowns need to be separated every four or five years. Before digging up the rhubarb crowns, I gave a lot of thought to the location of my new bed. Rhubarb likes deep, well-drained, acidic loam in an area that gets full sun or mixed sun and shade. Once the rhubarb is planted, it will be there for several years, so I wanted to choose its place wisely. I could have put it in my vegetable garden, but it will be better off in an area that doesn't get tilled regularly, so I gave it a bed of its own. That way, I won't damage the roots when I turn over the garden in spring.

Breaking up the roots in the future will be easier if the crowns are planted properly. To prepare the bed, I dug a trench about 3 ft. wide and 8 in. deep. I put about 4 in. of well-rotted manure in the trench



Lay the groundwork for your rhubarb before bringing it home or dividing your own (photo, above). Make sure each division has a bud or leaf on top (center left). If the crowns are being moved from one garden to another, pack them in damp manure for the trip (left).



Manure is the key to a healthy start. Plant the crowns in a trench with 4 in. of manure at the bottom. The author sets his new plants 3 ft. apart (photos, left and above).



GROWING RHUBARB

- Prepare a bed in full sun or mixed sun and shade. Plants like deep, well-drained, acidic soil.
- Dig a trench 3 ft. wide and 8 in. deep. Put 4 in. of manure in the bottom and cover with 2 in. to 3 in. of loam. Plant crowns 3 ft. apart.
- Separate crowns every 4 to 5 years in early spring when a few sprouts appear.
- To separate, ring around the crown with a spade and raise the crown from the soil. Crowns should come apart easily.



Pull the bottom, cut the top. Pulling the stalks rather than cutting them prevents damaging the crown. The author uses the discarded leaves to mulch his plants, and he never has to battle weeds in the rhubarb bed.



Locating rhubarb

The best place to get rhubarb is from a friend, neighbor, or family member. Since everyone who has rhubarb should be dividing it regularly, there should be lots of crowns free for the taking.

If you can't find anyone with rhubarb to share, your local nursery may have crowns for sale. Be sure to select crowns with buds on top; if the top of the crown has been cut off, the plant will die. Varieties with red or red-green stalks like 'Valentine' and 'MacDonald' are most common.

You can also order rhubarb from the following garden catalogs: **Gurney's**, 110 Capital St., Yankton, SD 57079, 605/665-1930; **Nourse Farms, Inc.**, 41 River Rd., So. Deerfield, MA 01373, 413/665-2658.

and covered it with 2 in. or 3 in. of loam. I could've used the same planting process with holes 18 in. wide, spaced 3 ft. apart, but I think it's easier just to dig a trench.

Divide and multiply. My mother says the best way to dig up rhubarb crowns is to wait until the first few sprouts appear in early spring so you can locate the plants. Ring around the roots with a spade just as you would do to dig up a small tree. Push the spade as deep as possible when making the ring to get beneath the roots. Gently push down on the spade handle to raise the rhubarb crowns out of the soil.

We could tell my mother's plants were ready for dividing because each original crown had generated six to ten more. The crowns came apart easily, probably because my mother planted her rhubarb in properly prepared beds. Each crown resembles a gnarly carrot or pair of carrots grown together. It's okay to tug or cut the little root connections between the crowns when separating them. If the roots haven't been divided in a long time, some of the crowns will be rather large and can be cut in half. Cut the roots lengthwise, separating each leg. Just be sure there are buds on top of each piece, or the crown won't sprout (center left photo, p. 47).

A New Home for the Family Treasure

To move the crowns to my house, we packed them into pails of damp manure. We had so many young crowns from my mother's seven plants that she started a new bed of eight. I established two beds with a total of 24 crowns, and I gave away 30 more to friends who wanted to start beds.

We purposely left two plants undisturbed so my mother would have rhubarb this year. You should not pick from the new plantings during the first season and only lightly the second to allow the crown to gain strength. Rotating the divisions is a good idea so you don't have a rhubarbless year.

Rhubarb is an easy keeper. Planting in a new bed is easy once it's prepared. We laid the crowns out in an alternating pattern, spacing them 3 ft. apart. Using a hand

Designing with rhubarb

by Jan Gertley

Rhubarb is a particularly striking vegetable to use in kitchen garden design. Its bold leaves and strong red and green stalks make this architectural plant a good focal point. The following are just a few planting ideas that combine rhubarb with a variety of other plants. Incorporate these ideas into your kitchen garden or use the principles of design to inspire other plant compositions.

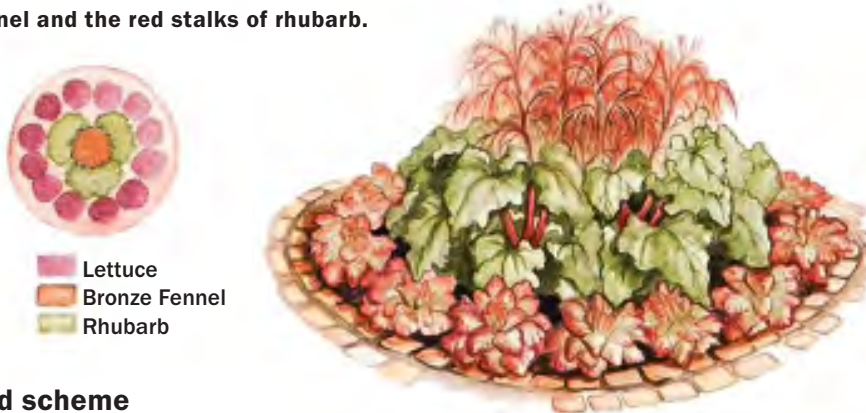
Perennial bed

If your kitchen garden has an area specifically designated for perennials, consider this combination, which uses asparagus as a backdrop. The textural contrast between tall, feathery asparagus and the dominant rhubarb leaves creates interest, while the small strawberry plants form a compact border.



Central display

This striking combination is perfect for the center of a garden. Delicate plumes of bronze fennel rise above a trio of rhubarb plants ringed with red leaf lettuce. Smaller in scale, the ruffled lettuce leaves echo the form of rhubarb leaves. Tinged with bronzy-red coloring, the lettuce coordinates nicely with both bronze fennel and the red stalks of rhubarb.



Red scheme

Four red-stemmed vegetables of various heights make a bright and dazzling, multi-textured display. Tall, burgundy okra provides a colorful backdrop, while the majestic rhubarb remains the center of attention, flanked by ruby-stemmed Swiss chard and burgundy-stemmed beets.



shovel we opened up the soft loam and manure, set the crown in, and firmly pressed the soil back, covering part way up the leaf stalks (upper right photo, p. 48). Spreading a little manure around each plant helps mulch it and keep moisture in the soil. We watered the new plantings well after all the crowns were in the ground. The whole process of preparing a new bed, dividing the roots, and planting the crowns took us only two hours, and that included fetching manure from a neighbor's pile.

Rhubarb is very hardy and requires almost no care. My mother's primary bed is next to her driveway, and during the fall and winter we frequently park on and plow over it when clearing snow. And every spring the shoots pop right back. We usually mulch the beds with manure or leaves in the late fall after the rhubarb's leaves die back. To save plant strength, we cut off the flower spikes when they appear. And that's about it. Most of the work is in dividing the plants every four to five years.

Stalks are the main event. The harvesting season for rhubarb is relatively long. We begin picking in mid-April and frequently go on through July. The stalks get stringier as the season wears on, but sometimes we've picked into August. I like young stalks for nibbling and thicker ones for cooking. Picking is best done by pulling the stalks sideways and away from the center of the plant, rather than cutting (lower right photo, previous pages). The stalk stubs remaining if you cut them off can be susceptible to decay and infestation.

Even leaves have their uses. The leaves contain oxalic acid, which makes them mildly poisonous, so they should be cut off and discarded. My grandfather always laid the leaves around the plants. We never knew why until we found out oxalic acid acts as a weed killer. No wonder we never have weeds growing around the rhubarb.

At the moment, my rhubarb is snug in its new home, building strength for the harvest and crowns for the generations to come. And I can already taste the pie.

Mike Guertin is building a new house in his hometown of East Greenwich, Rhode Island,

As American as Rhubarb Pie

BY LIZ HOLLAND

In my grandmother's time, rhubarb was known as pie plant, and that's probably still the use that comes most quickly to mind. For sure, it does make a great pie, but rhubarb's uses don't stop there. One of my favorites is rhubarb conserve, which is fast, easy, and versatile. It goes into the muffins below, but it's also great spread on them, as well as on croissants, popovers, or even toast. Fold it into whipped cream and layer between baked squares of puff pastry, brush the top layer with some of the conserve or sprinkle it with powdered sugar, and you have a quick, elegant rhubarb Napoleon. Or you can use it to fill tiny tart shells, to go between the layers of a cake, or to top ice cream.

And if you have more rhubarb than you can use, just chop it up and freeze it in bags for an out-of-season treat.

Rhubarb Conserve

Makes 3 cups

4 cups diced rhubarb
1¹/₄ cups sugar
Splash of orange juice
1 tsp. vanilla

Bring the rhubarb, sugar, and orange juice to a simmer in a medium, non-aluminum saucepan over medium-low heat. Cook for about 20 min. or until the mixture thickens considerably and coats the back of a spoon. Stir occasionally. Add vanilla at the end of the cooking time. Cool. The conserve can be refrigerated for up to 2 weeks.

Strawberry Rhubarb Muffins

2 dozen muffins

3¹/₂ cups flour
1 cup rolled oats or oat bran
4¹/₂ tsp. baking powder
3/4 cup brown sugar, tightly packed
1¹/₂ tsp. cinnamon
1/2 tsp. ginger
1/4 tsp. nutmeg
2 large eggs
3/4 cup canola oil
1¹/₄ cups milk
1 tsp. vanilla
1/2 tsp. balsamic vinegar
1 cup Rhubarb Conserve (recipe at left)
3 cups coarsely chopped strawberries

Preheat oven to 400° F. Grease muffin tins.

In a large bowl, mix all dry ingredients. In a separate bowl, whisk together the eggs, oil, milk, vanilla, and balsamic vinegar. Add the rhubarb conserve, chopped strawberries, and wet ingredients to the dry ingredients, and gently mix until just combined.

Scoop the batter evenly into the muffin tins using an ice cream scoop. Bake for 20 to 25 min. or until the center of a muffin springs back when pressed.

Pie Plant Pie With Muscat Raisins

8 servings

Pastry Dough:

2 cups flour
1/2 tsp. salt
1/3 cup cold unsalted butter, cut into bits
1/3 cup vegetable shortening
6 tbsp. ice water

Filling:

4 cups chopped rhubarb
1/2 cup Muscat raisins



1 cup sugar
1 egg
1 tsp. vanilla
Pinch of salt
1/4 tsp. cinnamon
1/8 tsp. nutmeg
1 tbsp. unsalted butter

Using a food processor, or by hand, mix the flour and salt. Cut in the butter and vegetable shortening until the mixture is in pea-size pieces. Add the cold water, and mix until just combined. Form the dough into two flattened balls, wrap in plastic, and refrigerate for at least an hour.

Preheat oven to 400° F. Remove one ball of dough from the refrigerator. Using a well-floured rolling pin and surface, roll out the pastry crust, and line a 9-in. pie pan.

To make the filling, mix the rhubarb, Muscat raisins, sugar, egg, vanilla, salt, and spices together in a medium-size bowl. Pour the rhubarb mixture into the prepared shell and dot with the butter. Roll out the second ball of dough to fit over top of pie. Seal top and bottom crusts and cut holes in the top crust to let steam escape.

Bake on the bottom rack for 20 min., then lower oven temperature to 350° F and bake for 50 to 60 min. more, until the filling is bubbling and the pie has browned.

Liz Holland is chef at the Off-Centre Cafe on Nantucket, Massachusetts.