

# ENJOY THIS NUTRITIONAL POWERHOUSE'S TARTNESS SOFTENED BY SWEET

Delicious pie comes to mind but rhubarb a player in many desserts and dishes

*Vicki Hayman*

**R**uby red or spring-green stalks and huge leaves are a signal for enjoyment of an overlooked plant – rhubarb!

Gardeners refer to rhubarb as “the first fruit of the season” to appear in the spring garden and is enjoyed throughout the summer. Only the stalks are used. The leaves are poisonous.

A member of the buckwheat family, rhubarb has big, heart-shaped, crinkled leaves and red-tinted stalks. Fruit or vegetable? Horticulturally, rhubarb is a perennial vegetable enjoyed as a fruit. It provides a unique tart flavor.

Rhubarb species can be grouped into two broad categories – green color of the stalk interior or red interior. An example of a green interior variety is Victoria. Others in this category have stalk exteriors varying in color from pure green to light red on the outside with a green interior.

The second category consists of red rhubarb. These stalks are red inside and out. Some common red varieties include Canada Red, Cherry Red, Crimson Red, McDonald,

and Valentine. Most people prefer red stalks for the color they add to recipes.

## **Plant in Spring**

Rhubarb plants require an extended chilling period with temperatures below 40°F. Plant rhubarb in spring in a site that receives at least six hours of direct sun each day and is away from trees and shrubs to give plants ample room; individual rhubarb plants can measure up to 4 feet wide and tall.

Rhubarb thrives best in well-drained soil high in organic matter. To plant crowns (budded pieces) or established plants, set them 4 feet apart in holes. Cover the crown or top of root ball with 1 inch of soil, firmly press the soil, and then water. Excessively deep planting delays maturity and can result in plant death.

Mulch plants in the summer, fertilize, and keep the soil moist to prevent the stalks from becoming stringy and tough. Cut seed stalks and flowers from the base of the plant as soon as they appear because they sap energy that should go into growing stalks for next year.

Do not harvest stalks the first



*A red interior rhubarb variety.*

year; this allows good crown and root development. Harvest lightly the second year. Rhubarb can be harvested up to 10 weeks by the third year. To ensure continued production, take care not to remove more than one-half the stalks from any one plant during any one harvest. Rhubarb plants can yield harvests for more than 5 to 10 years.

### **Twist and Pull**

When harvesting, choose stalks at least 10 inches long and firm. Grasp the stalk near the base of the crown and pull upward, twisting the stalk slightly to one side to snap it off at the bottom. Early spring stalks offer the most flavor and tenderness. Stalks harvested later in the season are often pithy and tough.

Remove all plant debris when the stalks die back in fall. Mulch plants after the ground freezes. In spring, pull mulch away from around the plants to let the sun warm the soil.

Look for fresh-looking, firm, and blemish free stalks whether harvesting from a garden or from a produce section. Avoid limp stalks and stalks with split ends, indications the rhubarb is not fresh or it has not been stored properly. Leaves should be fresh and unwilted if on stalks.

Refrigerate stalks without leaves up to two weeks in sealed plastic bags. Refresh crispness by standing stalks in water for one hour before using. Wash and cut into pieces just before using.

### **Powerful Nutritional Punch**

One of the reasons people cultivate and eat rhubarb is for its nutritional value. It contains dietary fiber, protein, vitamin C, vitamin K, B complex vitamins, calcium, potassium, manganese, and magnesium. Rhubarb is a rich source of flavonoids like beta-carotene, lutein, and zeaxanthin. A cup of cooked rhubarb with no added sugar contains approximately 50.4 calories.

Rhubarb can be eaten raw but, because of its tartness, is generally cooked and sweetened with sugar, honey, fruit juice, syrup, berry preserves, fruit, or other sweeteners.

Rhubarb is delicious in all kinds of desserts, made into a refreshing juice, and this tart vegetable also



### **Be safe preserving food**

Reliable sources of food preservation information include the UW Extension Food and Nutrition website (Note: we use the URL shortener Bitly to reduce the length of addresses) <http://bit.ly/extensionnutrition>; the U.S. Department of Agriculture Complete Guide to Home Canning, <http://bit.ly/usdacanningadvice>; the current Ball Blue Book or the Ball Blue Book online at [www.freshpreserving.com](http://www.freshpreserving.com); or the So Easy to Preserve book from the University of Georgia Extension Service.

**Vicki Hayman** has yet to write the book “Mother Nature Consults Me for Nutritional Advice,” but she could. She is a University of Wyoming Extension nutrition and food safety educator based in Weston County and serving northeast Wyoming. She can be reached at (307) 746-3531 or [vhayman@uwyo.edu](mailto:vhayman@uwyo.edu).

## Gardeners refer to rhubarb as “the first fruit of the season.”

works well in savory dishes. Rhubarb can be substituted in most recipes that call for cranberries.

Many people enjoy the flavor of rhubarb by itself, but its flavor partners well with many other fruits such as strawberries, raspberries, oranges, grapefruits, plums, and apples. As a sauce, rhubarb makes a delicious accompaniment for meats such as poultry, venison, salmon, and halibut. Cardamom, cinnamon, cloves, ginger, and nutmeg complement the tartness of rhubarb.

Recipes generally call for pounds, cups, or number of stalks. Three to five stalks make about 1 pound. One pound of rhubarb makes about 4 cups of raw chopped rhubarb. Four stalks of rhubarb equals approximately 2 cups of diced rhubarb. A 12 oz. package of frozen rhubarb equals approximately 1 1/2 cups.

When cooking rhubarb, avoid aluminum, iron, or copper pans as the high acidity of rhubarb reacts with these metals. The reaction causes the rhubarb to turn a brownish color and can cause the pan to discolor. Glass bake-ware works well if rhubarb is baked.

Freshly harvested rhubarb can be refrigerated for a few days. Beyond that, it needs to be used or preserved using a different preservation method, including canning, drying, fermenting, freezing, and pickling.

Rhubarb is the crowning glory of spring's fresh produce, produces all summer, and adds to dishes throughout the winter months for a cost of “next to nothing.” Enjoy the endless possibilities that rhubarb has to offer!



### **BASIC RHUBARB SAUCE:**

Cut enough cleaned rhubarb into 1-inch pieces to equal 1 quart.

Stew the rhubarb in ½ cup of water for 5 minutes or until rhubarb is tender. Fruit juice can be substituted for all or some of the water. Add sweetener if desired. Raisins can be added for variety and to sweeten the sauce. Spices such as mace, nutmeg, or cinnamon can be used. Rhubarb sauce makes a good dessert topping or a sauce on chicken, pork, or fish.

