

Growing Your Own

A beginner's guide to gardening

Rhubarb

Rhubarb is a cool-weather vegetable often eaten like a sweet fruit. The crisp stalks add tart flavor to spring fruit desserts, jams, and baked goods. Rhubarb is a perennial plant, so it grows back each year. This means that you can plant it once and enjoy delicious treats for several years.

Varieties

These types all grow well in Kentucky:

- **Canada Red** is a smaller variety with bright red stalks and sweet flavor.
- **MacDonald** has strong, upright growth and some red color.

- **Valentine** bears long, deep-red stalks with less tart flavor.
- **Victoria** has green stalks with pink-blush color at the base and is the most common variety.

How much to plant

One to three rhubarb plants will provide enough stalks for most families.



MacDonald
Nourse Farms



Valentine
Erika Olsen, University of Kentucky



Victoria
Kristin Durbin, University of Kentucky

Rhubarb Planting

Depth Dig a 12-inch-by-12-inch hole.
Bury crown 1 inch below surface.

Plant Spacing 3 feet apart

Rows 4–5 feet apart

Safe Planting Dates March–early April

How and when to plant

Rhubarb needs full to partial sun and well-draining soil. Rhubarb grows better in cool soils, so protection from harsh afternoon sun is recommended. Since it will likely be in that same place for many years, choose a spot on the edge of the garden or along a fence where it is less likely to be in the way. You can grow rhubarb in a container, but it should be at least 10 gallons in size, or around two feet deep.

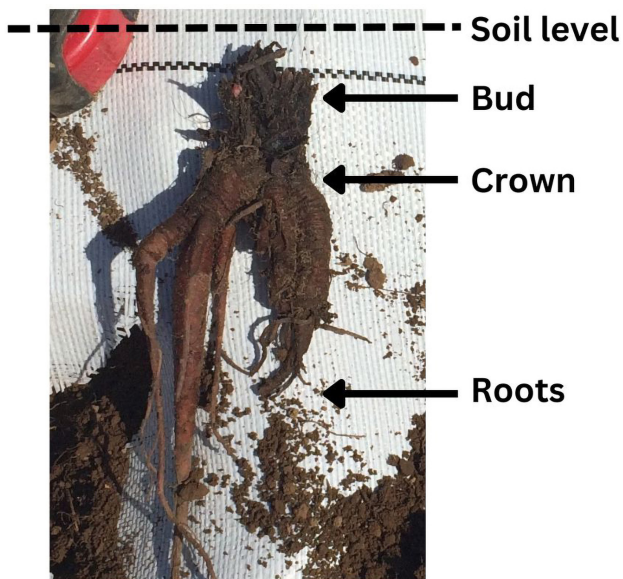
Large, ruffled rhubarb leaves add interest to your yard. Most types will grow two to four feet high and wide.

Rhubarb is usually grown by planting a piece of a crown. The crown is where the plant stem meets the roots and where new leaf growth begins each year. You can buy these pieces or get them from someone who has an older rhubarb plant that has been divided.

Plant crown pieces in March or early April as soon as you can work the ground. If you are unable to plant crowns immediately after buying, you can store them in a cool, dark place for a week or more.

To plant, dig a hole 12 inches deep and wide. Add some compost and partially fill the hole back up with soil as needed. Plant so that the crowns are one inch below the soil surface. Be sure to place them with the bud side up. Water well. Rhubarb grows best with additional nutrients. Consider adding compost around the crowns when you plant. Add a slow-release fertilizer once plants begin to grow each year. Follow package instructions.

New leaves should grow within a few weeks after planting. Pull weeds that emerge near the rhubarb plant, as they can compete for water and nutrients.



Rhubarb crown ready to plant
Kristi Durbin, University of Kentucky



New leaves are shown growing up from the crown. You can add compost or a slow-release fertilizer around crowns in the spring.

Kristi Durbin, University of Kentucky

Pests and disease

Rhubarb generally has few problems. However, if your plants start growing but then turn brown at the base, they may have crown rot. Remove and destroy decayed plants. Start new plantings in a different location. Japanese beetles can also feed on rhubarb leaves. You can pick them off by hand or spray them off using a strong jet of water. Discard the beetles. New leaves will begin to grow and usually the plant will be fine.



Japanese beetles on leaves
Kristi Durbin, University of Kentucky

Harvesting

Rhubarb harvest is recommended in spring or early summer. Wait one year after planting for your first harvest. You can lightly harvest in the second year. In the third year and beyond, you should be able to harvest for eight to 10 weeks.

To harvest, pull the whole stalk from the base using both hands; rock side to side and pull down as needed. Don't cut the stalk, as this can introduce disease. Pick the largest, thickest stalks (ideally one inch in thickness). You can harvest half of the plant at one time. Leaves are poisonous to eat. Only the stalks should be eaten. Cut the leaves from the stalk and compost or discard.



Pull out the entire rhubarb stalk and cut off and throw away the leaves.

Kristi Durbin, University of Kentucky

Sometimes flowers will bloom from rhubarb plants. If you see this, remove the whole flower stalk to help the plant focus on growing leaf stalks.



Rhubarb flower stalks and flowers
Kristi Durbin, University of Kentucky



Remove the entire flower stalk.
Kristi Durbin, University of Kentucky



Harvested rhubarb stalks before poisonous leaves are cut off
Katie Beck, University of Kentucky

**Rhubarb leaves are poisonous to eat.
Only the stalks should be eaten.**

Serving

Rhubarb is rich in vitamins C and K, as well as potassium, calcium, and fiber.

Choose crisp rhubarb stalks. Remove leaves, wash stalks, and cut off the ends. If there are tough strings, you can remove these by lightly rubbing a knife down the length of the stalk.

You can eat rhubarb raw, but it is most often chopped and cooked. It is often combined with strawberries. Rhubarb jams, muffins, sauces, breads, cakes, and pies are all delicious. Most recipes will use sugar to balance its tart flavor. You can also roast it and even use it in savory dishes.



Remove and discard or compost rhubarb leaves before preparing the stalks.

Katie Beck, University of Kentucky



Chopped rhubarb with strawberries

Katie Beck, University of Kentucky

Storing

Store rhubarb stalks in a bag or container in the crisper drawer of the refrigerator. They should keep for a week or more, like celery stalks. You can also freeze rhubarb and save it for later.

Clean up and ongoing care

In fall, mulch rhubarb with a few inches of straw or light mulch. Pull mulch slightly back from plants in spring for new leaves to grow through. Consider adding compost or a slow-release fertilizer in spring.

After four to five years of growth, you can divide your rhubarb crowns to give you more plants. Use a sharp shovel to slice and divide the crown and root system. Be sure to leave your original plant with at least five buds. Divide the rest into crown pieces with at least two or three buds per piece. Plant the pieces in new holes or give them to friends.



Dividing rhubarb crowns
Kristi Durbin, University of Kentucky

Summary

Varieties

Canada Red, MacDonald, Valentine, and Victoria are all recommended varieties for Kentucky.

How much to plant

One to three plants should provide plenty of rhubarb.

How and when to plant

Plant rhubarb crowns in early spring as soon as you can work the ground. Plant crowns in a large hole, mix soil with compost, and cover with roughly an inch of soil.

Pests and diseases

Watch for crown rot and Japanese beetles.

Harvesting

Harvest for eight to 10 weeks in the third year. Pull the entire stalk out. Cut off and throw away leaves; they are poisonous.

Serving

Chop and cook rhubarb stalks in jams, baked goods, and desserts. Their tart flavor goes well with sweet spring fruit such as strawberries.

Storing

Store cut stalks in a bag in the refrigerator. They should keep for a week or more.

Clean up

Before winter, lightly mulch over rhubarb crowns to protect them. Pull back mulch in the early spring and consider adding a slow-release fertilizer or compost.

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