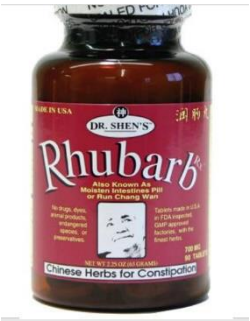
Rhubarb: DVGC Club Talk. November 2017. David Neill

Many consider rhubarb a fruit because it is used in a lot of desserts, but it is technically a vegetable.



Its history has been medical rather than culinary. Indeed, widespread culinary use began only 200 years ago.
The Chinese first used dried roots as a laxative about 5000 years ago and the first documented uses in western civilization are 2100 years ago. Unlike some laxatives rhubarb effects are short lived and painless.
It has only recently been grown for its stems rather than its roots. Widespread consumption of rhubarb stalks began in Britain in the early 19th century with its popular adoption as an ingredient in desserts and wine making. The first recorded recipe was for rhubarb tarts in 1824, to use up the rhubarb stalks, which were a waste product at the time. The increased availability (and affordability) of sugar made masking the naturally bitter rhubarb taste possible on a larger scale, so that consumers could experience rhubarb as a tasty filling for pies and tarts.

The accidental discovery of forced rhubarb (growing rhubarb in winter) accelerated the growing popularity of rhubarb to the point of a mania in 1800's Britain. Two-year-old roots were grown outside without harvesting so that the plants stored energy in their roots. After being frosted the roots were lifted and grown in dark heated sheds producing tender crimson stalks harvested by candlelight because strong light stopped their growth. At peak production just before WW2 a special express train took 200 tons a day to London. Growing rhubarb in the dark may reduce the concentration of malic and oxalic acid. Such 'forced' rhubarb is certainly less sour and more tender than standard rhubarb. Culinary use dropped dramatically during WWII, possibly as a direct result of the deprivations of war, most notably the rationing of sugar.

Rhubarb grows well in our climate, needs very little care, crops early in the spring and the evergreen varieties looks good all year round. It is good for desserts, jam or wine. The leaves are a biodegradable weed mat.

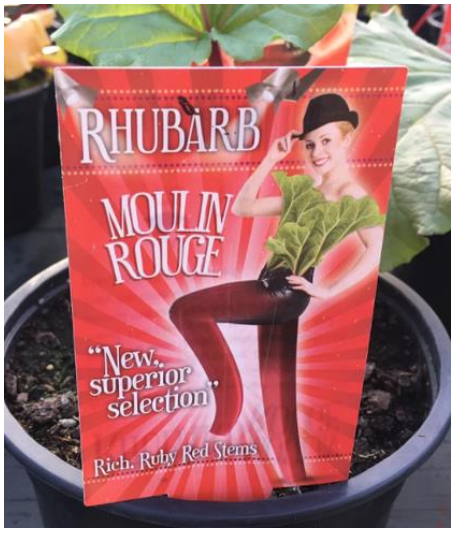
For best results put it where it will not shade or compete with other plants as it can grow more than a metre wide and almost as high. It is best to grow plants from roots. Plant them in winter, with the bud just above the ground in a slightly raised hill. It is suggested that every 3-4 years you should lift the dormant crowns in winter and use a sharp spade to cut off the vigorous outer eyes to replant and then dispose of the weaker middle but some gardeners wait up to fifteen years for the plant to lose its vigour and/or for the black surface roots to develop rotten hollows.

Rhubarb needs a spot with some sunshine, where it will not dry out but cannot get waterlogged and with lots of compost. Southland grower Peter Brass suggests a wheelbarrow sized hole filled with manure (chicken is best but cow, horse or sheep will also do). Care for it with perhaps a handful of blood and bone (100g) around each plant in spring, a good weeding in autumn and mulch with rich manure in autumn.

Eat only the stalks and remove these by twisting at the base rather than cutting. Remove the extreme base and the leaves for composting. Rhubarb can be picked from early spring until late summer but may be more bitter in the autumn when the stalks have more oxalic acid – in which case you may wish to remove the top few centimetres along with the leaf. And even more bitter after frost although you may be lucky enough to have a variety that does not develop this bitterness.

Rhubarb usually does not grow true from seed and the problem here is that our biosecurity regulations currently prohibit the importation of rhubarb plants in any form, from cuttings to tissue culture, other than seed. Three new

varieties are meant to be from a superior, stable Australian seed line “Crimson Crumble” which has the reddest stems in Linda Hallinan’s garden. A similar “Ruby Tart” and “Ruby Red” are said to be better for pots.



Peter Brass has propagated his family’s strain by tissue culture and this is the “Moulin Rouge” that you see in garden centres and so it qualifies as an old variety that has been grown in NZ for a long time.

Rhubarb is 95% water and is a good source of potassium, contributes minor amounts of vitamins, and is low in sodium. Rhubarb's crisp sour stalks are rich in vitamin C, dietary fibre and calcium, although the calcium is combined with oxalic acid and so is not easily absorbed by the body. Rhubarb is somewhat acidic (pH 3.1-3.2) but in most recipes, this is normally offset by sugar. One serving (2/3 cup) diced Rhubarb contains about 6% of the daily dietary fibre value, about 10% of vitamin C and about 20 calories. Eat only the cooked stalks and eat them in moderation.

Fresh rhubarb stalks can be stored in a fridge for up to three days before use and frozen for up to a year.
There is no need to blanch before freezing, just prepare them into the desired length and portion size then freeze.

A useful vegetable, available early in the season, easy to grow, virtually pest free, decorative and tasty (with sugar).

References:

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