

RHUBARB

Description: Rhubarb is an interesting vegetable that is often thought of as a fruit. It is part of the knotweed family of plants that also includes sorrel and buckwheat. Both rhubarb and sorrel are perennial crops that we rely on to fill the gap in our diet between stored winter vegetables and spring planted crops. These vegetables are high in oxalates which is what gives them that sour, tangy flavor. In the case of rhubarb, the stalk is the edible part of the plant and the leaves are discarded.



Preparation & Use: Rhubarb may be eaten raw, however it is pretty sour in the raw state so most individuals prefer to cook it first. While the tart, sour flavor of rhubarb is often masked or covered with copious amounts of sugar and sweeteners, it doesn't have to be that way. Instead of masking the characteristic flavors of rhubarb, why not use those innate qualities to your advantage?! Rhubarb pairs well with fatty meats such as duck, pork, chicken thighs and salmon. The tartness of the rhubarb helps to balance the fattiness of the meat as well as eggs and dairy products such as cheese & cream. It also helps to wake up your taste buds which makes it easier for you to experience other flavors in a dish. The flavor of rhubarb can stand up to bolder spices such as curries, cardamom, peppercorns, cinnamon and ginger. Rhubarb can be used as a stir-fry vegetable, added towards the end of cooking so it just starts to soften, but still holds its shape. It can also be used to create a flavorful braising liquid and then sauce for pork and other meats. It also makes a delicious compote or chutney to eat alongside Indian food, spoon over grilled or roasted meats, or simply eat as a snack with cream cheese and crackers!

Of course, you'll never go wrong with enjoying rhubarb in sweet preparations as well. Muffins, cakes, cobbler, fruit crisps and beverages are all excellent ways to use rhubarb. Rhubarb pairs well with fruits including strawberries, raspberries, blueberries, lemon, oranges and apples. Finally, sugar is not the only sweetener for rhubarb; the flavors of honey and maple syrup are also nice accompaniments.

Storage: Rhubarb should be stored in a plastic bag in the refrigerator to keep it fresh and firm until you're ready to use it. If it gets a little floppy or dehydrated, don't throw it away as it can still be used in dishes where you're cooking the rhubarb. Rhubarb can also be frozen for later use. If you want to freeze rhubarb, simply wash the stalks, cut into smaller pieces (size is up to you) and put it in the freezer in a freezer bag. You do not need to cook rhubarb before freezing it, you can freeze it raw.

Cultural & Historical Background: Rhubarb is thought to have originated in the areas of China, Mongolia and Russia. Before it was used as a food, rhubarb root was traditionally used as a medicine to treat a wide range of ailments, including detoxification, liver & blood cleansing. Its culinary use also started in the east where it was used in drinks and meat stews before later spreading to Europe and finally the United States at the end of the 18th century. It now holds a special spring time slot in our Midwestern diets.

Growing Information: Rhubarb is a perennial plant that grows from a gnarly root base referred to as a "crown." Once a plant is established it can continue to produce for many years. The first several years are very important for the plant to make sure the crown develops and has enough energy to become established. For the first two years of the plant's life, we don't harvest any rhubarb from the plant. In the third year, we start harvesting stalks.