

# ❖ Renee's Garden ❖

## Rhubarb Growing Guide

### Climate and Growing Region

Rhubarb is a long-lived perennial plant that is very winter-hardy, growing best in cooler climates that receive plenty of moisture.

Winter temperatures of 40°F (4°C) or lower are required for dormancy and to stimulate bud break and spring growth. In spring and summer, stalks and leaves will continue to emerge as long as temperatures remain moderate. After a stretch of summer days with temperatures over 80-85°F (27-30°C), the plants will begin to appear dormant, and will only produce more foliage when the temperatures decrease again in late summer.

In most climates, grow rhubarb in full sun in acidic, well-drained loam rich in organic matter.

### Selecting and Preparing Your Site

Choose a site that gets full sun, and in a place where the plants can remain undisturbed for several years. In the high desert, choose an area with afternoon shade. Rhubarb tolerates most soils but grows best on fertile, well-drained soils that are high in organic matter, and prefers a slightly acidic, well-drained soil, well amended with organic material.

**ON ARRIVAL:** When your bare root divisions arrive, open the box immediately to check the plants. They should be firm, not slimy or mushy. A small amount of mold on the roots is harmless.

It is not necessary to wait until after the late spring frosts to plant rhubarb; they will begin to grow in the cool weather of early spring, and a light frost will not hurt the roots even if the leaves show a touch of frost-burn.

It is best to plant them right away, but if that is not possible, you can “heel in” the plants for longer storage by digging a trench outdoors or placing the roots in a container with soil or sand. Cover them well with moist soil, sand or compost so that the roots are protected from air pockets. The temperatures where they are stored needs to be above freezing, but this method will protect the roots for a longer period from drying out.

If you need only to wait a few days before planting, you can keep them viable in a cool, shady area where the temperatures will remain between 32° and 45°F. If the air is dry, you may want to cover them with some slightly moist sawdust or leaf mulch.

Before you plant, carefully remove all weeds and amend the soil by working in compost or aged manure.

If you are in an area that gets extended periods of summer heat, place rhubarb where it will receive some afternoon shade and where you can provide plenty of water. (Rhubarb will not thrive in full shade). If a north-facing slope is available, that will also keep summer temperatures cooler.

## Planting and Spacing

Space rhubarb plants 3 feet apart. Plant each bare root division with the buds not more than 1 inch below the surface and firm the soil around them. If you have heavy clay, leave the buds just at the surface level, and firm the soil around the root, but not over the buds. Water well after planting.

**NOTE:** Bare root rhubarb divisions ship while still dormant. After planting, they will need to slowly come out of dormancy, so be patient as you wait for new growth to show. Depending on outdoor temperatures, it can take 3 to 5 weeks for the roots to settle, come out of dormancy and send out feeder roots – all before you see anything much happening above ground. Don't over water them, which can lead to crown rot.

## Cultivation and Maintenance

Fertilize the plants with well-decayed compost, manure, or a balanced fertilizer about a month after planting and again each spring when they begin to grow. An established planting will also benefit from an additional fertilizer application after harvesting.

Rhubarb plants need about one inch of water each week. Keeping the beds regularly watered and weeded, especially the first season, will pay off in the long term. In following years, they may produce flower stalks, which should be removed in order to promote more vigorous growth of stalks. Healthy rhubarb plants rarely experience pest or disease problems.

## Harvesting

Do not harvest any stalks the first season after planting so that first growth of leafy stalks can nourish roots and plants will become well-established. In the second year, you can take a light picking if the plants look vigorous, and by the third year you can harvest stalks as needed.

Harvest the stalks by grasping them at the base and pulling them with a twisting motion (preferred), or by cutting them off at ground level, taking care not to cut into the crown.

An established planting can be harvested more than once in a season. Water between cuttings, and discontinue harvesting if the new growth is coming in with thin stalks.

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