



**Tastes to
celebrate**

Rhubarb

In this new series on growing for flavour and taste, food writer and grower Mark Diacono explores the rich world of this summer fruit

Rhubarb (*Rheum x hybridum*) has long been grown for medicinal use, the earliest records indicating it was grown in China – the country of likely origin – 5,000 years ago. It came to Europe along the silk road in the 1300s, later through Russia, too, though the cost of transportation made it expensive. Marco Polo, among others, sought its place of origin with an eye to expanding its range, but it was not until the early 1600s that cultivation began in Europe – and even then, it was not considered a culinary plant until the late 1700s.

Rhubarb finds a new home

By the early 1800s commercial growing of rhubarb had taken off in the UK. A flourishing community of rhubarb producers sprung up within a few square miles in an area of West Yorkshire between Wakefield, Morley and Rothwell. Encouraged by a combination of ideal rainfall and temperatures, favourable soils, and waste wool, ashes and soot from local industries to fertilise the soil, this



became known as the Rhubarb Triangle.

Competition for the earliest sales (and hence the best prices) inspired a new method for growing rhubarb – forcing – that continues to this day. For this, rhubarb plants are grown outdoors for two years to develop and build strength, before being brought into lightless sheds in early winter, after a period of frost has ensured dormancy. The sheds are heated, causing the plant to awaken, and in the absence of sunlight for photosynthesis the plant uses its own sugar reserves to feed the growth of early stalks. In the darkness, they grow a wonderful vivid pink, more succulent and sweeter than outdoor rhubarb while fetching a premium.

In recent years, the development for garden use of new selections has been biased towards producing sweeter rhubarbs that crop early and over a long period. An example is 'Pink Blossom', cropping from late February until late July – though, with the resurgence in sour and fermented foods, traditionally sharp rhubarb may be popular again. »



From the collection at RHS Garden Harlow Carr, North Yorkshire

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| 1 | 'Valentine': sweet tasting and vigorous Harvest: May–June. | | |
| 2 | 'Laxton's No 1': seldom-grown selection from 1931. May–June. | 5 | 'Sutton's Seedless': does not bolt so can be harvested late. May–August. |
| 3 | 'Crimson Wine': richly coloured stems, average flavour. May–June. | 6 | 'Stockbridge Cropper': heavy, early crops, so an excellent selection for forcing. March–May. |
| 4 | 'Hawke's Champagne' AGM: reliable, | 7 | 'Grandad's Favourite' AGM: vigorous and high yielding; good flavour. April–July. |
| | | 8 | 'Raspberry Red' AGM: early, prolific and sweet tasting. March–June. |
| | | 9 | 'German Wine': sweet, compact, and productive. April–July. |



Planting, growing and harvesting rhubarb

Planting Grow rhubarb in full sun or part shade, in moist but well-drained soil. Plants are usually grown from crowns, planted bare-root in winter, or as potted plants at any time of year. When planting, add well-rotted manure to the hole and allow at least 80cm (32in) between individual plants, positioning the top of the crown 2.5cm (1in) below the soil surface. Keep plants well watered through the first year. Selections such as 'Timperley Early' AGM and 'Champagne' are reliable and freely available but others are worth looking for. To keep plants cropping well, split every five years between autumn and early spring, replanting healthy divisions.

Feeding A 7.5cm (3in) spring mulch of compost or well-rotted manure acts as a long-term feed, helps prevent weeds, and retains moisture. Keep emerging buds clear of mulch. An occasional liquid feed or scattering of organic chicken manure pellets from late spring until autumn gives plants a boost.

Harvesting Allow plants a year to establish from planting before picking, taking just three stems per plant in year two. Harvest early selections from March, the main season being May until the end of July (August for late selections). Choose stems with good colour, and aim to pick when the leaves have just unfolded fully. Grip stems near the crown, twisting as you pull to ensure you do not damage the crown. Harvest only a third of the plant at a given time. Cut off leaves from harvested stems: they are high in oxalic acid and not to be eaten. As productivity slows through summer, stop picking to allow plants to build up reserves for next year.

Forcing Using a forcer to create a warm, lightless microclimate results in pale pink, sweet-tasting stems, three weeks or more early. A large plant pot or upturned rubbish bin placed over the crown makes an excellent substitute to expensive terracotta forcers. Heaping manure around the base of the forcer increases temperatures and leads to an even earlier harvest. Force a rhubarb plant only once in four years to avoid exhausting it. Once the forced stalks have been harvested, allow plants to recover for the rest of the year.



GAP/MICHAEL KING



When planting rhubarb (above), position the crown carefully and mulch with well-rotted manure or garden compost.

When pulling rhubarb stems (left), take care not to damage crowns of plants – grip the stem close to the base and twist as you pull.

Terracotta rhubarb forcers (below left) can be used to produce sweet, tender stems, early in the season.

