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Rhubarb and Asparagus: A bounty of botany in these perennial vegetables

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Rhubarb is a perennial vegetable with a unique taste that makes it a favorite in many pies and desserts. Some people refer to Rheum rhabarbarum as the pie plant and think of it as a fruit, but it is the petioles of rhubarb that we eat, not the botanical fruit or seed of the plant.

Rhubarb can be started from seed, but it is often started by planting crowns. Crowns are fleshy and woody rhizomes. "Rhizomes" is a fancy name for stems that grow underground. The underground stems grow both a fibrous root system and buds that produce leafy shoots. The petioles are the shoots that connect the underground stem to the leaves of a plant, like celery stalks.

So getting back to rhubarb, we eat the stalks. But don't just chomp into them like celery or you'll get a big puckering surprise, as they are very tart. The stalks are sliced, combined with strawberries and other fruits, and sweetened with sugar to make pies, tarts, jams, and muffins. I hear stories of sauces for chicken and fish too. In the grocery store you'll see red stalks, pink speckled green stalks, and rarely just green stalks.

Whatever you do, DON'T EAT the leaves of rhubarb as they are extremely poisonous. Rhubarb leaves contain high amounts of oxalates and people have died trying to use the leaves as a vegetable green. That said, rhubarb remains an old favorite in the vegetable garden.

If you want to grow your own rhubarb, then find a cool, damp spot in your garden and one that is not front-and-center in the heat of summer. Rhubarb is a hardy, cool-season perennial that is relatively resistant to frost. As it grows it produces large crinkled leaves on typically red stalks making it a very attractive plant in the cool weather. The plants grow vigorously in spring to early summer and this is when stalks should be harvested. Stalks are most flavorful when fairly young, so harvest them soon after the leaf expands.

In our summer rhubarb glamour fades and the plant goes dormant until fall, when there is another flush of growth. The tops are usually killed in the first freeze of winter, but the roots survive and produce new leaves the following spring. Never harvest more than half the stalks in order to preserve enough foliage to sustain the crown.

In California "Cherry Red" is grown for long, thick, deep-red stalks and "Victoria" produces long, smooth stalks that are light green with pink speckles more intense at the base. Crowns purchased from a

nursery have been in cold storage for several months, so buds are ready to grow once crowns are planted.

Plant crowns in January and February. Place them 2-3 inches below the soil surface and set crowns about 3 feet apart. During the first growing season, few, if any stalks will be ready for harvest. After that time the plant can produce for several years.

Rhubarb prefers fertile, well-drained soils that are high in organic matter with a pH of 6.0 to 7.0. So plant rhubarb where you might plant camellias and azaleas, like on the north side of your house with afternoon shade. Be sure to amend the soil with compost, leaf litter, peat moss and/or an acid planting mix, and your rhubarb should be good to grow!

Asparagus is another perennial vegetable that is started in the garden by setting out crowns in winter. It takes a couple of years to develop a bed of asparagus plants before it is strong enough to support a weekly harvest for 8-10 weeks in early spring, but it will last more than 10 years. Plant in full sun or in the background of flower beds.

Edible asparagus spears are young shoots that are cut about 8 inches long at the ground surface. If left to grow, they develop into fernlike leaves. The plant continues to push new shoots until the weather turns hot.

Water and fertilize the plants during the summer fern season, so plants can manufacture food to be stored by crown roots for next year's shoot growth. Ferns will turn brown in the fall, indicating that carbohydrates have been transferred to the roots. At this time cut ferns back and allow plants to enter winter dormancy. In spring new shoots will appear, starting the cycle again.

UC 82 and UC 157 crowns are commonly grown in California and are tolerant of fusarium wilt, a troublesome root disease. Plant about 10 crowns per person.

Start by working the soil a foot deep mixing in large amounts of compost, steer manure, peat moss or similar organic material. Dig a trench 9-10 inches deep and place large crowns about one foot apart. Cover the crowns with 2 inches of soil, water and then let the crowns settle and grow. As new shoots emerge, gradually fill in the trench with additional soil.

Asparagus should be well irrigated throughout the first year. In following years, asparagus should be watered mostly during the fern season, not the harvest season. Remember not to harvest the first year and only harvest for a few weeks in the second year. By year three the bed of asparagus plants should sustain a 10-week harvest schedule.

Whether you grow your own or not, be sure to eat your veggies!

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