

RHUBARB – PLANTING, AND DIVIDING OLDER CROWNS

Start preparations now to make sure you have a ready supply of this fascinating and ancient crop.

The rhubarb patch provides our first delicious fruit of the year. Late autumn is the time to decide which varieties to plant, divide and force.

Our earliest records of one kind of rhubarb date back to 2700BCE. The ancient Chinese ground down the roots and used the powder as a laxative. Over the centuries, this powder became an important export and its special properties widened dramatically. By the 16th Century, it was thought to cure 'Wamblings of the gut', convulsions and cramps, sciatica, 'Yeoring' and mange, and to 'cleanse the bodie from wan and pale spots'.¹

One rhubarb species was first introduced to England five Centuries ago, but mistakes happen and this *Rheum rhubarbarum* was quite different to the ancient medicinal herb, *Rheum palmatum*. Although *Rheum rhubarbarum* is the one we now grow in our gardens, the herbalist, John Gerard, had no time for it, calling it 'bastard rhubarb'. When his contemporaries found its root had no special properties, they tried using the leaves instead. Gerard was not impressed and described the anguish a butcher's boy suffered at their hands. The poor lad was given four rhubarb leaves to cure his ague. They 'wrought extremely downwards and upwards within an hower afterwards and never ceased until night'.¹

The boy's agony may have been caused by the oxalic acid in rhubarb leaves and, to this day, people are very suspicious about these poisonous leaves. I can't count the number of times I've had to reassure folk that it's perfectly safe to compost them. After all, it's been estimated that it would take 5kg of leaves to kill a rat, but only if it ate the lot.

Between the 16th and 18th Centuries, no one seemed to know which rhubarb they were growing, but during the 1760's, Sir Alexander Dick of Prestonfield worked on propagating new strains from one rhubarb seed and received a medal from the Royal Society of Edinburgh for his efforts. Half a century later, this work bore fruit and his rhubarb stalks reached the dining table, largely because cheap sugar started to make tart fruit, like rhubarb, palatable.

Stories abound as to who first started to make rhubarb even tastier by forcing it and it is possible that the honour belongs to James Smith. This well-known head gardener at Hopetoun House, near Edinburgh, reputedly began to treat it like seakale in 1824. The crowns were covered with soil and special pots were then placed on top. As ever, lots of different techniques were used to produce the much tastier, blanched rhubarb stalks. I find the best and simplest method is to cover a crown with a large pot towards the end of winter. After 6 or 7 weeks, we'll tuck into the resulting feast. The plant isn't picked again that season and isn't forced for 2 or 3 years afterwards.

Victorian gardeners took things much more seriously. In the autumn, a few roots would be dug up, left on the soil for several weeks and, after a good frosting, were brought into a darkened room or cellar for forcing. This may have led to the old myth that crowns for dividing should be dug up at the back end, left exposed on the soil over winter and planted in early spring.

Dividing rhubarb crowns is an important way of keeping the crop healthy, a point stressed by the mid 20th Century gardening writer, Arthur Symons. "Although.. rhubarb is the most important permanent kitchen garden crop, it is often relegated to a dark, out-of-the-way corner

and there neglected until senile decay sets in.”² Assuming the ‘senile decay’ refers to the plant, not to the gardener, we should feed and cosset it to put off this decline.

As Symons explains, rhubarb is well worth taking seriously, so select the varieties you’d like and place an order over the next few weeks. Prepare the site before winter sets in. Crowns are spaced 90cm apart. Prepare each hole, 2 spit’s deep and wide enough to accommodate the whole root. Rhubarb is very greedy so dig in a generous amount of home-made compost and well-rotted manure, if possible. Leave the soil to settle for a few weeks. The best time to plant is late winter or very early spring, before growth starts. Cover the crown and firm the soil. Don’t pick during the first year but start pulling stalks the following spring.

Over time, the crowns will become weaker and stalks much thinner, so divide them after 5 years or so. This winter task is a major undertaking as the root system is enormous. Having prepared a new piece of ground some weeks earlier, divide the woody clump with a sharp spade, or even a saw, using the outer sections of root for replanting. They should have 2 or 3 buds forming. Divided crowns should not be cropped for the first year, so be sure to deal with one plant each winter to keep a steady supply of rhubarb every year.

¹ “The Kitchen Garden” David Stuart.

² “The New Vegetable Grower’s Handbook” Arthur Symons.