

The rhubarb revival

Helene Pizzi

Once this charming plant was a familiar feature of country cottage gardens, and rhubarb pies, tarts, and sauce were familiar seasonal treats. As rhubarb is an easy-care plant, we are seeing a rhubarb renaissance, and it is being planted more and more, not only in our vegetable patches, but also in our mixed borders, where its large rich green leaves make an elegant show.

The first mention of rhubarb dates back to 2700 BC, from China, where it was considered a potent drug and used for medicinal purposes. The Greek Dioscorides wrote about rha or rheon, from the Bosphorus. The Romans imported the roots from those they considered barbarians living beyond the Volga River, once named Rha. Its Latin name, *Rheum rhabarbarum*, reflects this. Marco Polo spoke about Chinese rhubarb rhizome. It was brought into Europe along the silk road and was very expensive in Medieval times. Rhubarb was only popularly eaten in England after the early 19th Century, and it reached its peak as a favourite before the Second World War. The Italians still enjoy it as a classic after dinner digestive liqueur, Rababaro.

This familiar, traditional, old-fashioned cottage garden plant was first cultivated in England in Banbury, Oxfordshire, from seeds sent from Russia in 1762. Two years later *R. palmatum* was raised from seed in Edinburgh's Botanical Gardens. By 1778 it was thought of as a food plant in Europe. In 1790 it was introduced into the USA, and by 1822 it was sold in season in produce markets and soon became a 'classic' favourite for sauces, tarts and pies.

The plants are attractive with their edible reddish stalks and large, handsome, dark green leaves (which are toxic), and are perfect in a mixed cottage garden flower border. Although rhubarb is eaten as a 'fruit', it is actually a vegetable. It grows well in cool temperate climates and is the earliest fruit to reach maturity in the season. It is high in calcium, vitamin C and fibre. The stalks can be harvested and frozen so we can enjoy rhubarb tarts, sauce and pies all year around.



Illustration / Tom Boulton

Thinking of my personal disastrous 'Rhubarb Pie Story' still makes me shudder. Having arrived in my

Milwaukee home at the end of July, I wanted to make a rhubarb pie for my dinner guests, knowing that it was their favourite. I searched supermarkets and, farmer's markets and was surprised that I couldn't find a single stalk of rhubarb. My neighbour had a friend with rhubarb in his garden and he kindly said I could pick all I wanted. I made four pies, one for my dinner guests, one for them to take home, and the other two as thank-you pies. When the pies came out of the oven, instead of a softened filling, the pie looked like it was filled with little lengths of wood. The smell was heavenly, and as my guests poked at their pieces, they admitted that it tasted very good. There was only one problem, each piece of rhubarb was as hard as wood, and impossible to chew. We sucked the hard pieces, ate the crust and left the hardest lumps of rhubarb on the plate. Now I know better. There is a period of about 8 to 10 weeks that the rhubarb stalks are tender and right for harvesting. After that the stems mature, becoming hard and woody - that was why I hadn't found any in the markets. We all still laugh at the pie experience.

The following makes a delicious rhubarb cheesecake, well worth trying.

NB: 1 USA cup = about 240ml or 8 ounces.

Rhubarb Cheesecake

Combine 1¼ cups flour, ½ cup oats, ½ cup brown sugar, and then cut in ½ cup of butter. Set aside half, and press the remaining into a buttered 9-inch-square pan to make the crust.

For the filling: beat 8 ounces of cream cheese with ¾ cups sugar. Beat in a pinch of salt, ½ teaspoon vanilla, ¼ teaspoon cinnamon, a pinch of nutmeg, and 1 beaten egg. Stir in 1½ cups cut rhubarb. Pour over crust. Sprinkle the rest of the crumb mixture on top and bake in a medium oven (350°F or 175°C) for 35 to 40 minutes. Cool before serving.

Plant rhubarb in your garden in a sunny well drained place. If you mulch to suppress weeds and feed it with well-rotted manure, it will reward you as a food crop and its beautiful foliage will look well in the garden for as long as 20 years. It is a wonderful easy care perennial that is perfect for the cottage garden. Enjoy!
Helene gardens in Rome and Milwaukee.