

The Irony of Rhubarb



The next time you're enjoying a slice of rhubarb pie at a dinner party, educate your dinner guests with a few little known facts about the strange ironies of rhubarb. Is it healthy or deadly? Is it a fruit or a vegetable? Does it cure you or make you sick? Does it stain dishes, or make them shiny? It's a strange plant indeed!

We all think it's a fruit and we treat it as one – making yummy desserts like pies and crisps – but it's actually a vegetable. (Botanically speaking, vegetables are the edible part of plants that are roots (radish, turnips, carrots), leaves (lettuce, spinach), flowers (broccoli, cauliflower) and stems (celery AND RHUBARB). Fruits on the other hand, are the part that contains the seeds (apples, cucumbers, tomatoes, and peppers).

Rhubarb was often used in the old days to protect from gum disease, and as a general overall tonic and cure for whatever ails you, yet it could give you a terrible stomach ache.

It was given to children to induce vomiting, and yet was also often used as a miracle cure for constipation. And let's not forget the irony here – it could also kill you! Rhubarb stalks make a wonderful dessert, yet the leaves can be deadly! They can be boiled and made into a liquid pesticide strong enough to kill most garden bugs. But the poison in the leaves that kills bugs can

also kill us! When cooking with rhubarb you should never eat rhubarb stalks that look like they have been damaged by frost. If the stems are not firm, throw them out. Frost damage can cause the oxalic acid in the leaves to move into the stalks. It really isn't worth risking your health over. If in doubt, throw it out! (At this point, if you're sharing this information at dinner as suggested, you could point out that you are absolutely certain that your rhubarb in the pie was not touched by frost! You don't want your guests leaving and heading for a hospital when you have so much more information to share with them!)

For over a hundred years, cooks have used rhubarb to clean a burned pot – they boiled a bit of chopped rhubarb for about 10 minutes (without adding any sugar!) until the water began to evaporate and they had a watery paste – they'd rub this into the burned on substance, rinse it, and apparently have a shiny good-as-new pot. Yet when cooking with rhubarb, if they used an aluminum pot, it not only stained the rhubarb brown and gave it a metallic taste, it also stained the pot a terrible brown colour that couldn't be removed! Today it is still necessary to know that you should use cookware that does not react with the acids in rhubarb. A glass, ceramic, or stainless-steel pot is best to use. Aluminum and copper pots will turn the rhubarb AND your pots brown. Most people are aware of the risks of cooking with aluminum

pots and pans, and its links to Alzheimer's disease, so they're rarely still used. But for anyone who still has them, acidic foods, such as tomatoes and rhubarb, absorb the most aluminum and should therefore be avoided. (Anodized aluminum cookware has a hard, non-stick surface which makes it scratch-resistant, and easy to clean, but it also reduces leaching of aluminum into acidic foods, such as tomatoes and rhubarb, that you cook in them.)

Rhubarb is considered an acidic food, but if you add another acidic ingredient such as apple or lemon juice while cooking rhubarb, the red colour will be preserved much better. But ironically, while we think of honey as being sweet, it's actually very acidic, and it also keeps the rhubarb red! (And while many people think that red rhubarb is riper and sweeter than green rhubarb, it's actually just a different variety – some types of rhubarb turn red and some types don't, and the green ones are no more tart than the red ones.)

The word rhubarb comes from the Latin word "rhababarum" which means "root of the babarians" and the Romans labelled people who ate rhubarb "barbarians." Yet, ironically, the Chinese were cultivating rhubarb as early as 2700 BC and using it as a medicine to cure any number of health issues – hardly sounds barbaric!!!

Long ago, it is said that rhubarb could be responsible for you

getting thrown into jail, and – ironically – it could also be responsible for getting you out! In the 1500's it was so loved as a medical cure that its price was far higher than that of exotic spices like cinnamon and saffron. If you were caught stealing a stalk from a garden you were immediately off to jail (or worse!) But apparently there is some documentation that shows that if you were thrown in jail, a little rhubarb knowledge could be as good as a "get out of jail free" card. A few lucky people wrote in their journals that they passed on their medicinal knowledge to the wardens or judges and were released because of it!

If your guests are having a second piece of rhubarb pie or lingering over their coffee, here's a few more interesting little tidbits you can share!

It was very common in the 1930's to have actors repeat or mutter the word "rhubarb" continuously to provide radio sound effects of a large crowd. It's still used today in school drama productions where they need to make it sound like a large group of people off stage – a few students simply repeat the word rhubarb over and over into a microphone, and it sounds like a lot of mixed bits of conversations.

Rhubarb grown in a hothouse does not have the stringiness that is common in field grown rhubarb – but it also doesn't have the flavour! Yet many chefs prefer it as it keeps a beautiful reddish pink colour when it's stewed, whereas field

grown rhubarb can turn an unappetizing brown colour.

In recipes containing rhubarb, amounts needed are often given in pounds. If you don't have a kitchen scale, it's handy to know that one pound of rhubarb is equal to 3 cups of chopped raw rhubarb.

And while the days of our annual WHS garden show seem to be long behind us, those of us who judged the rhubarb category or wrote the criteria for a winning entry, or placed the red ribbons on the best looking stalks might have been helped a lot to know about the official government standards used all over Europe for a farmer to sell his/her rhubarb as "grade A" or "Class 1". The UNECE, or "United Nations Economic Commission for Europe" is a part of the United Nations that sets policy development and standards to follow and they have determined that there are many things that make rhubarb a good "class 1" product or an inferior "class 2" product. But just in case we ever do have shows again, here's what UNEFE came up with. For Class 1 rhubarb, "The leaf stalks must be grown from "Rheum rhaponticum L. The stalks must be well developed with deep pink or red colour for a minimum of 2/3 of the stalk. The stalk must be straight, smooth, and have no insect damage. There must be no abnormal moisture on the outside and no foreign smell or taste. There must be a bit of the leaf blade attached and neatly cut 5 cm from the top of the

stalk and no more. (We also all know that even with those strict standards, Mariette would have still been the winner with her exceptional entries of rhubarb at many of our Annual Garden Shows – even in late August her rhubarb was perfection!)