

Ready for rhubarb

Perfect for pies — and much more

By JEANMARIE BROWNSON
The Daily Meal

Simply put: Rhubarb polarizes people. My sister-in-law offered us ALL the rhubarb from her garden. Many friends decline a slice of rhubarb pie no matter how attractive the crust is latticed. That's OK. More for the rest of us!

Rhubarb is super-easy to grow — especially in the Midwest — and it comes back every year with little help from the gardener. On a cool spring day, plant crowns (or divisions from fellow gardeners) in a sunny spot with plenty of room for the plant to spread. Keep the plants moist throughout the summer.

Most rhubarb plants yield harvestable stalks after the second year and will do so for more than eight years. If your plant is older, I recommend starting fresh; old plants yield tough, tasteless stalks.

Always compost or discard the green leaves from the rhubarb stalks — they contain high concentrations of oxalic acid, which can cause serious health problems in humans and pets.

At the farmers market, the brilliant red stalks of fresh rhubarb amid spring's bounty of fresh asparagus, peas and skinny chives ignite ideas. If you can't stand rhubarb's relatively short season, don't worry, it freezes quite well. Dice the stalks, freeze the pieces solid on a baking sheet, then pack into freezer



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Savory rhubarb and summer cherry chutney.

bags. Frozen rhubarb complements fresh cranberries when they come into season.

I turn piles of the reddest, skinniest stalks into a lemony rhubarb compote. It's beautifully suited for breakfast pancakes and waffles. We also ladle the sweet sauce over buttermilk biscuits and top them with sweetened whipped cream and fresh berries for a shortcake dessert. Or you can dollop the pretty red sauce generously over the following bread pudding for brunch or dessert.

Thicker, tarter, less red stalks work well in a savory chutney condiment destined for grilled pork, poultry and brown rice bowls. Fresh ginger, brown sugar and red wine vinegar add sweet and savory notes. Often, fresh tart cherries are available at the same time as rhubarb, so I stir some into the chutney for more color and a flavor pop. Spread the chutney thinly over toasted bread for a smoked ham or turkey sandwich with cheese. Or, swirl some into plain yogurt for a sauce to serve with roast lamb, grilled eggplant slices or more great grilled dishes.

teaspoons lemon rind and 1/4 teaspoon salt into a large saucepan. Heat over medium-high, stirring constantly for 5 minutes.

3. Reduce heat to low. Cook, uncovered, stirring often, until rhubarb softens and mixture thickens, 6 to 10 minutes. If using strawberries, stir in 1 quart and simmer 2 minutes. Remove from heat.

4. Serve warm. Or, divide among small covered containers and refrigerate up to several days or freeze for several months.

STRAWBERRY RHUBARB BREAD PUDDING

I like to use honey, whole wheat or sprouted 7-grain bread here. Look for strawberry rhubarb preserves at the local farmer's market or order from American Spoon at www.spoon.com. Unsweetened coconut milk adds a delicious flavor to the pudding; you can skip it and replace it with more milk, a nondairy milk or heavy cream. Prep time: 20 minutes Refrigerate: 2 hours or overnight Bake 40 minutes Total time: 3 hours Makes 6 servings

1 loaf (16 ounces) honey, whole wheat or sprouted 7-grain bread

Butter
2/3 to 1 cup strawberry rhubarb preserves or reduced-sugar strawberry fruit spread or preserves

6 large eggs
2 cups whole milk (or a combination of skim milk and half-and-half)

1 can (13.5 ounces) unsweetened coconut milk (OR 1 1/2 cups heavy whipping cream or oat milk or more dairy milk)

1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
1/4 teaspoon salt
1/4 teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg

Confectioners' sugar
Lemony rhubarb compote,



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Lemony rhubarb compote.

warmed slightly for serving, see recipe
Whipped cream or vanilla ice cream, optional

1. If bread is unsliced, slice it into 1-inch thick slices. Cut bread slices into 2-inch pieces. You should have 10-12 cups.

2. Heavily butter a 13-by-9-inch baking dish. Put the bread pieces in the pan in an even layer. Use a small spoon to evenly distribute dollops of strawberry rhubarb preserves over the bread pieces, using 2/3-1 cup of preserves.

3. Whisk 6 eggs in a large bowl until smooth. Whisk in 2 cups whole milk, 1 can unsweetened coconut milk, 1 teaspoon vanilla, 1/4 teaspoon each salt and nutmeg. Gently pour the egg mixture over the bread, making sure to moisten everything.

4. Heat oven to 375 degrees Fahrenheit. Remove the plastic wrap and let the dish stand at room temperature while the oven heats. Bake until puffed and golden, 40-45 minutes.

5. Remove from the oven and dust heavily with confectioners' sugar.

6. Use a spatula to serve squares of the pudding on warmed plates. Top with a generous spoonful of the Lemony Rhubarb Compote. Serve with whipped cream or ice cream if desired.

SAVORY RHUBARB AND SUMMER CHERRY CHUTNEY

Serve this sweet, tart sauce spooned over grilled pork chops, chicken breasts or turkey tenders.

Use as a spread on a ham or smoked turkey and Havarti sandwich, or stir it into cooked brown rice with chunks of roasted butter nut and sliced green onions.

Prep time: 5 minutes
Cook time: 30 minutes
Total time: 35 minutes
Makes: About 5 cups

8-10 long stalks fresh rhubarb, 2 pounds total
1/2 medium-size white onion, finely chopped
1/2 cup packed dark brown sugar
1/2 small orange, finely chopped (1/2 cup)
1/2 lemon, seeded, finely chopped (1/4 cup)
1/4 cup red wine vinegar

2 cloves garlic, minced or crushed
1 tablespoon grated fresh ginger
1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce
1/2 teaspoon salt
1/4 teaspoon ground coriander,
1/4 teaspoon ground ginger
1 cup halved pitted sour cherries (fresh or frozen) or dried cherries

1. Trim ends off 8-10 rhubarb stalks and discard leaves. Cut rhubarb in half lengthwise. Cut crosswise into 1/2-inch pieces. You will have about 8 cups.

2. Mix all ingredients, except cherries, in a large non-aluminum Dutch oven. Cover and heat to a simmer. Reduce heat to low. Cook covered, stirring often, until the onion is tender, about 15 minutes.

3. Stir in 1 cup cherries. Simmer, covered, for 10 minutes. Uncover. Cook and stir until thick enough to coat the back of a spoon, 5-10 minutes.

4. Serve warm, at room temperature or divide among small covered containers and refrigerate up to several days or freeze for several months.

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