

UK COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE

UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY — COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE

Rhubarb

Introduction

Rhubarb is an herbaceous perennial grown for its edible leaf stalks. The leaves themselves are not eaten, either cooked or raw, as they can cause poisoning.

Marketing

Fresh market options for Kentucky-grown rhubarb include wholesale markets, farmers' markets, and roadside stands. Local retail markets, such as supermarkets, are also potential markets. Value-added products can include pies, bread products, fruit cups (mixed with strawberries), jams/jellies, and candy-type products.

Market Outlook

This vegetable crop is actually used as a fruit and has the advantage of being harvestable in early summer when most fruits are not yet ripe. Although a cool season crop, rhubarb can last far into the summer and provide variety at a farmers' market or roadside stand. There is a little wholesale market potential for rhubarb, but direct sales to restaurants, as well as local and specialty grocers, can always increase a crop's demand. In general, the market for rhubarb is limited and growers should begin with a small planting and expand as the market demand increases.

Production Considerations

Site selection and planting

Rhubarb is a cool season crop, thriving on a well-drained soil that is deep and fertile. Fields should be free of perennial



weed problems and deeply plowed. Applications of manure are very beneficial to rhubarb. Plantings are established from vigorous, disease-free crown pieces, each with two or more buds. Rhubarb should be transplanted in early March in Kentucky. Plantings are normally rejuvenated every 8 to 10 years by dividing crowns and resetting. Irrigation is usually not needed during the spring harvest; however, it is occasionally needed late in the season to insure good growth the next spring.

Pest management

Potential disease problems include crown rots and leaf spots/blights. Crown rot can be a serious problem in sites that do not have excellent soil drainage. Stalk borer and rhubarb curculio are the main insect pests that are occasionally encountered. Controlling weeds within fields and along borders is critical for effective insect and disease management.

Harvest and storage

Harvesting should be delayed until the second year, at which



time stalks may be removed during a short period (about 4 weeks) in the spring. A full harvest period (8 to 10 weeks) begins during the third growing season, and thereafter. Stalks are hand-harvested by pulling, not cutting, when they are 10 to 15 inches long. Freshly harvested stalks can be stored for two to four weeks at 32° F and 95 to 100 percent relative humidity.

Labor requirements

Labor needs per acre are approximately 35 hours for production, 192 hours for harvest and 13 hours for packing.

Economic Considerations

Initial investments include land preparation, purchase of crowns, and plant establishment. An additional start-up cost can include the installation of an irrigation system. A rhubarb crown can cost \$2.50 to \$6.00, depending on the variety, quantity purchased and supplier. The crown will begin contributing toward the cost of its purchase the year after it is planted. Depending on the initial cost of the crown and rhubarb selling price, it

will take 2 to 5 pounds of rhubarb per crown to cover the crop's establishment cost. This may occur 1 to 2 years after planting. Rhubarb, especially in small quantities, is a low-cost crop. Producers with market outlets will capture nearly the entire selling price in returns to land, labor and management after the initial year of establishment. Well-managed rhubarb could easily return a gross profit of \$8.00 to \$20.00 per crown per year.

More Information

- Vegetable Production Guide for Commercial Growers, ID-36 (University of Kentucky)
<http://www.ca.uky.edu/agc/pubs/id/id36/id36.htm>
- Marketing Options for Commercial Vegetable Growers, ID-134 (University of Kentucky, 1999)
<http://www.ca.uky.edu/agc/pubs/id/id134/id134.htm>
- Agricultural Business Profile on Rhubarb (Prince Edward Island Department of Agriculture and Forestry, 1999)
http://www.gov.pe.ca/photos/original/af_fact_rhub.pdf