

Extension Article – May 28, 2020
Nebraska Extension – Buffalo County
Carol Schwarz, MS, RD
Extension Educator

The Flavor of Rhubarb

Rhubarb is a beautiful garden plant, with huge extravagant, lush green leaves and pink or red stalks. There are several different varieties of rhubarb grown all over the world and used in a variety of cooking preparations. One thing consistent with all rhubarb is the toxicity of the leaves and roots. The rhubarb leaves contain high amounts of oxalic acid, a toxic and potentially deadly poison. Only the stems are edible.

To harvest, pull the stalks from the plant and trim off the roots and leaves. Small to medium-size stalks are usually more tender than large ones, which, may be stringy. For refrigerator storage, trim and discard the leaves then wrap the unwashed stalks tightly in plastic wrap, for up to two-three weeks. To keep the plants healthy, vigorous and producing well, remove only about one-third of the leaves from a plant at any one time.

Nutritionally, rhubarb is low in calories, but its tartness is often offset by the addition of sugar, which increases the calorie count. Rhubarb is 95 percent water and a great source of vitamin K, and has potassium and some vitamin C.

Rhubarb requires the addition of sugar because of its extreme tartness. Rhubarb is often considered a fruit, but it is actually a vegetable (leaf stem). It is prized for its mouth-puckering tartness which adds zest to pies, tarts, jam, glazes and a number of other desserts. The sourness of rhubarb also complements the sweetness of many fruits, especially berries.

When cooking fresh rhubarb, remove any brown or scaly spots with a vegetable peeler. Trim the ends and wash the stalks. Use anodized aluminum, stainless steel, non-stick coated aluminum or enamel-coated cast iron cookware when cooking rhubarb. If cooked in aluminum,

iron or copper pans, it will turn an unappetizing brown color. The metal of the pan interacts with the acids in the fruit to form brown compounds that darken both the pan and the rhubarb.

To freeze rhubarb, chop the stalks into 1/2-inch pieces, spread them on a sheet pan and place in the freezer. Once frozen, place the pieces into heavy-duty plastic freezer bags. Seal tightly, label and store in the freezer, for up to 8 to 12 months.

For more information on rhubarb, contact Nebraska Extension in Buffalo County, 1400 East 34th Street, Kearney 68847 or call (308) 236-1235.