



How to Grow Rhubarb

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September 2026

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Planting, forcing and harvesting in the UK



How to Grow Rhubarb in the UK: Pots, Pruning, Care

Rhubarb is the closest thing to a free lunch in the whole garden. You plant one crown, leave it largely alone, and it crops every spring for ten, fifteen, even twenty years, asking almost nothing in return. The clump in my Oxfordshire garden came as a split off a neighbour's plant well over a decade ago, and it has fed us crumbles and fools every single spring since, while also producing enough divisions to pass on to half the street. For sheer reward against effort, nothing else I grow comes close, though raspberries and blueberries run it close once established.

It is also one of the easiest things to grow, which makes it perfect for beginners. There is no annual sowing, no fussing, no real skill required. The few things that matter, where to plant it, how long to wait before picking, and how to keep it productive, are easy to get right once you know them.

Why Rhubarb Is the Best Crop for a Lazy Gardener

Rhubarb is a hardy perennial, which means you plant it once and it comes back year after year on its own. It is fully hardy across the whole UK, including the coldest parts of Scotland, and it actually needs a cold winter to crop well, so our climate suits it perfectly. While the rest of the garden demands constant attention, an established rhubarb crown just gets on with it.

It is also one of the very first crops of the year. While you are still waiting for everything else to get going, rhubarb is pushing up fat pink stems in early spring, often the first home-grown thing on the plate after winter. Pair it with the other easy perennial fruit and you have a low-effort productive corner of the garden for years. When to plant strawberries in the UK covers the other beginner-friendly fruit that crops for years from a single planting.

When to Plant Rhubarb in the UK

The best time to plant rhubarb in the UK is autumn or early spring, while the plant is dormant. Late autumn (October to November) is ideal, as the crown settles in over winter and romps away in spring. Early spring (February to March) is the other good window, before growth gets going. You can plant pot-grown rhubarb at almost any time of year as long as you keep it watered, but dormant-season planting of a bare crown is the traditional and most reliable approach.

Rhubarb is almost always grown from a crown (a dormant root section) rather than from seed, because seed is slow, variable, and takes years to reach cropping size. A crown gives you a known variety and a proper harvest much sooner. You can buy crowns from garden centres and suppliers like Thompson and Morgan in autumn and late winter, or, far better, get a division from a friend or neighbour with an established plant, which is free and just as good. UK vegetable planting calendar covers timing for everything else through the year.

Where and How to Plant Rhubarb

Position

Rhubarb likes an open, sunny or lightly shaded spot. Full sun gives the heaviest crops, but it tolerates partial shade better than most crops, which makes it useful for a spot that is too shady for vegetables. Give it room, though, an established rhubarb plant is big, easily a metre across, so it needs its own space rather than being squeezed into a row. Once planted it stays put for many years, so choose the position carefully. It is not a plant you want to be moving every season.

Soil

Rhubarb is a hungry plant and crops best in rich, fertile soil with plenty of organic matter. Dig in a generous amount of well-rotted manure or compost before planting, as this is the one crop where you genuinely cannot overdo the richness. It does want free-draining ground, though, as crowns can rot in waterlogged soil over winter. If you have heavy clay, work in compost and grit to open it up, or plant on a slight mound to keep the crown clear of standing water. How to tell if your garden soil is clay, loam or sand covers the checks, how to improve garden soil in the UK covers the enriching, and improving drainage in clay soil helps if you are on heavy ground.

Planting the crown



Set the crown so the fat buds sit right at the surface, planting too deep causes it to rot.

Planting depth is the one thing to get right. Dig a generous hole, enrich the soil with compost, and set the crown so that the growing points (the fat buds on top) sit just at or very slightly below the soil surface. Planting too deep is the classic mistake, as a buried crown is prone to rotting and slow to get going. The buds should be visible at soil level. Space plants about 75cm to 1m apart if you are putting in more than one, firm the soil gently, and water in well.

The Hardest Part: Not Picking It the First Year

Here is the single most important rule with new rhubarb, and the one that takes genuine willpower: do not harvest any stems in the first year. I know how tempting it is when you see those first pink stalks, but the plant needs that first full season to establish a strong root system, and pulling stems too early weakens it for good.

In the first year after planting, leave it completely alone and let it build up strength. In the second year, you can take a light harvest, just a few stems. From the third year onwards, the plant is fully established and you can harvest properly. That patience in the first year or two pays off with decades of heavy cropping, so it is genuinely worth the wait. A rhubarb plant you let establish properly will outproduce one you picked too soon for the rest of its long life.

When to Harvest Rhubarb (and When to Stop)



Pull each stem with a gentle twist rather than cutting, so it comes cleanly away from the crown

Once your plant is established, the harvest season runs from around April to June, sometimes into July. The stems are at their best in spring, tender and full of flavour. Knowing when to pick and, crucially, when to stop, keeps the plant healthy and productive.

To harvest, do not cut the stems. Instead, grip each stalk near the base and pull it away with a gentle twist, so it comes cleanly away from the crown. Pulling rather than cutting reduces the risk of rot and stub damage. Take only what you need and never strip the plant bare, leaving at least half the stems on the crown at any time so it can keep feeding itself through its leaves.

The important bit is when to stop. Stop harvesting by around mid to late June, or early July at the latest. After that, leave the plant to grow on undisturbed for the rest of the summer so it can build up energy reserves in the crown for next year's crop. Picking too late into summer weakens the plant. The old guidance to stop by the longest day is a decent rule of thumb. The leaves carry on feeding the crown all summer, which is exactly what powers next spring's harvest.



Always twist off and discard the toxic leaves, keeping only the safe and delicious stalks.

This matters, so it gets its own section. The stalks of rhubarb are delicious and perfectly safe to eat, but the leaves are toxic and must never be eaten. They contain high levels of oxalic acid, which is poisonous to humans and pets. Always cut the leaves off and discard them (they are fine on the compost heap, where the toxins break down harmlessly) and eat only the stalks.

This is worth knowing especially if you have children or pets, though in practice nobody is tempted to eat the big floppy leaves anyway. Just twist off and bin the leaf, keep the stalk, and you are completely safe. There is no danger at all from handling the plant or eating properly prepared stalks. Composting at home in the UK covers putting the leaves to good use.

Forcing Rhubarb for Early, Tender Stems



A terracotta forcer or upturned bucket excludes light and draws up early, tender pink stems.

Forcing is the classic rhubarb trick, and it is genuinely worth doing. By excluding light from a crown in late winter, you trick it into producing early, pale pink, exceptionally tender and sweet stems weeks ahead of the normal season. Forced rhubarb is a delicacy, milder and more delicate than maincrop, and it is what Yorkshire's famous "Rhubarb Triangle" is built on. The RHS rhubarb guide has good detail on the technique.

To force rhubarb at home, in mid to late winter (January or February), cover an established crown with a large upturned bucket, bin, or a traditional terracotta rhubarb forcer, blocking out all light. The crown, sensing no light, sends up long, slender, pale stems reaching for the light that never comes. These are ready to pull a few weeks earlier than normal and are wonderfully tender.

One important caveat: forcing takes a lot out of the plant, so only force an established crown of three years or more, and do not force the same plant two years running. Give a forced crown a year or two off to recover. Many gardeners with a few plants force one each year on rotation. Done sensibly, forcing gives you the earliest and best rhubarb of the year without harming the plant.

Growing Rhubarb in Pots

Rhubarb can be grown in a large container, which is useful if you have no open ground, though it is honestly happier in the soil where its roots can spread. If you do grow it in a pot, go big, since rhubarb is a large, hungry, thirsty plant and a small pot will not sustain it.

Use the biggest container you can, at least 50cm wide and deep, filled with a rich mix of peat-free compost and plenty of well-rotted organic matter. Keep it consistently watered, as pots dry out fast and rhubarb hates drying out, and feed generously through the growing season. A container plant will not crop as heavily or last as long as one in the ground, but it is perfectly possible.

Feeding and Watering Rhubarb

Rhubarb is a hungry, thirsty plant, and a little generosity here makes a big difference to the crop. The single best thing you can do is mulch generously around the crown each autumn or late winter with well-rotted manure or compost, keeping it clear of the central buds so they do not rot. This feeds the plant, retains moisture, and suppresses weeds all in one go. An annual mulch is really all an established rhubarb plant needs.

Beyond the mulch, a feed of general-purpose fertiliser in spring as growth begins gives the plant a boost, and watering well in dry spells keeps the stems coming, as drought makes them thin and stringy. Feeding vegetables properly in the UK and how often to water plants in the UK cover the wider principles. Do not let it dry out in summer, particularly while the leaves are still feeding the crown.

Dividing Rhubarb Crowns (Free Plants for Life)



Split a lifted dormant crown into sections, each with a healthy bud, for free new plants.

This is the part that makes rhubarb such good value, and the rhubarb equivalent of the strawberry-runner trick. Every few years, an established rhubarb crown can be lifted and split into several new plants, each of which grows into a full crown. One plant becomes many, for nothing.

Divide rhubarb in the dormant season, late autumn to early spring, ideally every five years or so. The job also rejuvenates an old, tired, or congested crown that has stopped cropping well, so it is as much maintenance as propagation. The method is straightforward:

Lift the whole crown with a fork while it is dormant and leafless. Using a spade or sharp knife, cut the crown into sections, making sure each piece has at least one fat healthy bud (sometimes called an “eye”) and a good portion of root.

Discard the old, woody centre of the crown, which is past its best. The vigorous outer sections are what you want.

Replant each section straight away in enriched soil, with the buds just at the surface, exactly as for a bought crown.

Water in, and treat each division as a new plant, so no harvesting in its first year.

Doing this every few years keeps your rhubarb young and productive and gives you a steady supply of free plants to spread around the garden or give away. My whole rhubarb patch, and several neighbours’ patches, all came from one original crown divided over the years.

Moving and Transplanting Rhubarb

If you need to move an established rhubarb plant, the rules are the same as for dividing. Move it in the dormant season (late autumn to early spring) when it is not in active growth, lift as much of the root as you can with a fork, and replant immediately in a well-prepared, enriched spot at the same depth, with the buds at the surface. Water it in and, as with any disturbance, go easy on harvesting the following year while it re-establishes.

Rhubarb is tough and moves well as long as you do it while dormant, so do not be afraid to relocate a plant that is in the wrong place.

Common Rhubarb Problems

Thin, spindly stems. Usually an old congested crown that needs dividing, or a hungry, dry plant. Divide every few years, mulch generously, and water in dry spells.

Crown rotting. Waterlogged soil or planting too deep. Improve drainage and make sure the buds sit at the surface, not buried.

Flowering stalks appearing. A thick flower spike sometimes shoots up, often triggered by stress, heat or age. Cut it off at the base as soon as you see it, as flowering drains energy from the crown.

No stems in the first year or two. Normal. New plants need time to establish. Be patient and do not harvest early.

Small crop on an old plant. The crown has become congested and tired. Lift and divide it in the dormant season to rejuvenate it.

Slugs on emerging shoots. They can nibble the tender early stems. How to get rid of slugs in the garden covers protection.

Common Questions About Growing Rhubarb

How do you grow rhubarb in the UK?

Plant a rhubarb crown in autumn or early spring in rich, fertile, free-draining soil in a sunny or lightly shaded spot, with the buds just at the soil surface. Mulch generously with manure or compost each year, water in dry spells, and do not harvest in the first year. From the third year you can harvest stems from spring to early summer, then leave the plant to build energy for next year.

When should you plant rhubarb in the UK?

The best time to plant rhubarb crowns in the UK is autumn (October to November) or early spring (February to March), while the plant is dormant. Autumn planting lets the crown settle over winter and grow away strongly in spring.

Pot-grown rhubarb can be planted at most times of year if kept watered, but dormant-season planting of a bare crown is most reliable.

When can you harvest rhubarb?

Harvest established rhubarb from around April to June, sometimes into early July. Do not harvest at all in the first year after planting, take just a few stems in the second year, and harvest properly from the third year. Pull stems with a gentle twist rather than cutting, and stop picking by late June so the plant can build energy for next year.

Are rhubarb leaves poisonous?

Yes. Rhubarb stalks are safe and delicious, but the leaves are toxic and must never be eaten, as they contain high levels of oxalic acid which is poisonous to people and pets. Always cut off and discard the leaves, keeping only the stalks. The leaves are safe to put on the compost heap, where the toxins break down harmlessly.

What is forcing rhubarb?

Forcing means excluding light from a crown in late winter by covering it with a bucket, bin or terracotta forcer, which makes it produce early, pale pink, exceptionally tender and sweet stems weeks ahead of the normal season. Only force established crowns of three years or more, and never force the same plant two years running, as forcing takes a lot out of the plant.

How do you divide rhubarb?

Divide rhubarb in the dormant season, from late autumn to early spring, roughly every five years. Lift the whole crown with a fork, cut it into sections each with at least one healthy bud and a portion of root, discard the woody centre, and replant the vigorous outer sections in enriched soil with the buds at the surface. Treat each division as a new plant and do not harvest it in its first year.

Can you grow rhubarb in a pot?

Yes, but use a very large container, at least 50cm wide and deep, as rhubarb is a big, hungry, thirsty plant. Fill it with rich peat-free compost and plenty of organic matter, keep it consistently watered, and feed generously. A potted plant will not crop as heavily or last as long as one in open ground, but it works well where there is no garden soil.

A Sensible Place to Start

If you have never grown rhubarb, here is the plan. In autumn or early spring, get hold of a crown, ideally a free division from someone with an established plant, or a bought one from a garden centre. Plant it in a sunny or lightly shaded spot in soil enriched with plenty of well-rotted manure or compost, with the buds sitting right at the surface. Then leave it completely alone for the first year, however tempting those first stems look.

Take a few stems in year two, then harvest freely from year three, pulling stalks from spring to early summer and stopping by late June. Mulch generously every winter, divide the crown every five years or so for free new plants, and remember to bin the poisonous leaves and keep only the stalks. Do that and one crown will feed you crumbles and fools every spring for fifteen or twenty years. There is no easier or more rewarding thing you can plant.

How to Contact the Editor

If you have comments or you know I have given wrong advice then please contact me by email at

info@yeovil-allotments-association.co.uk

If you have something to contribute or have a say on allotment life, then please use my email to send your contributions.

I am going to process the magazine issue once a month, so if there are comments you would like to make they can be answered in future editions.

I would like to add that most of the articles are taken off the web and some well known gardening and allotments magazines have been read in the making of our magazine content.

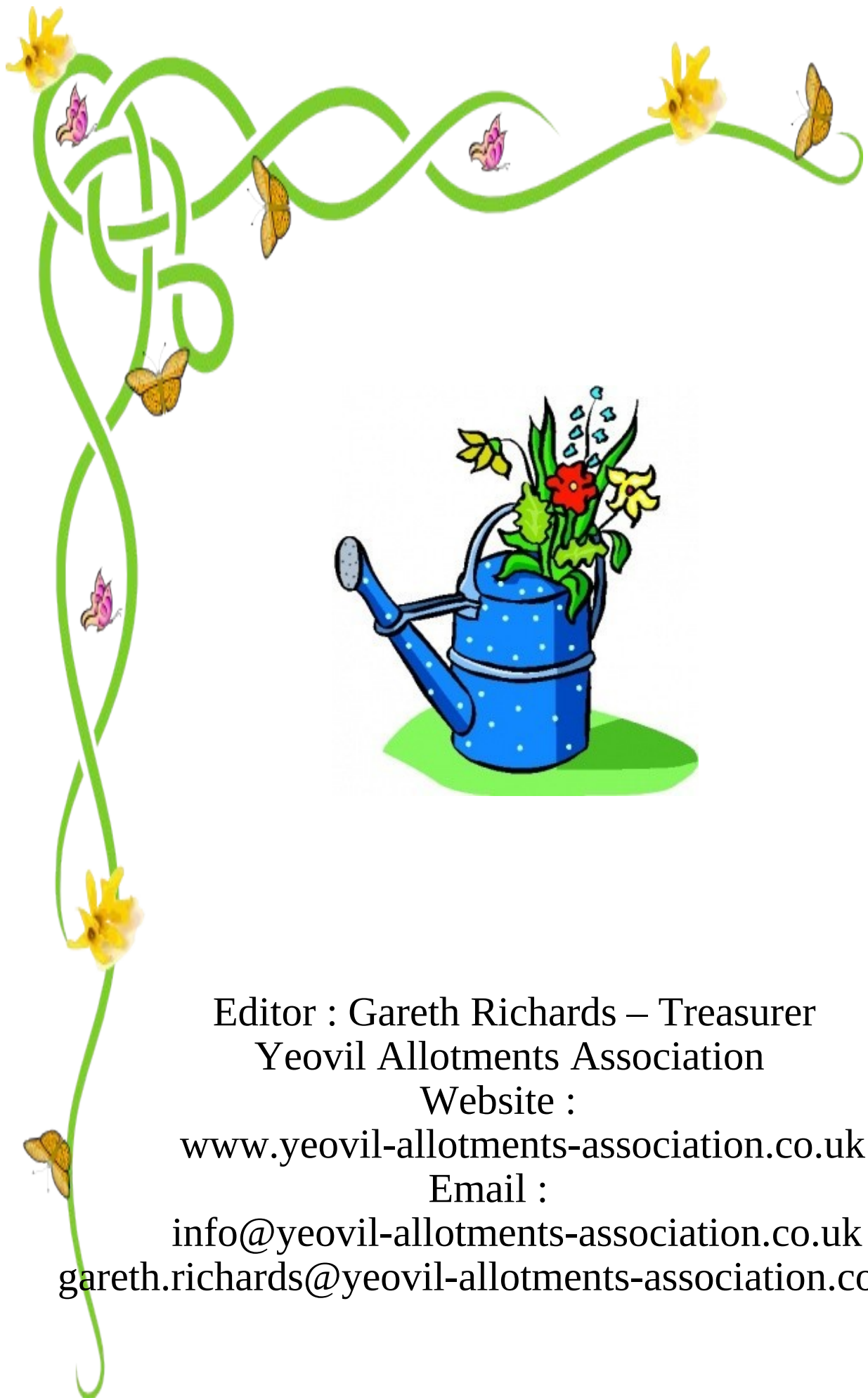
We also have our own website at :

www.yeovil-allotments-association.co.uk

where you can find this magazine as well as a catalogue

Happy Allotmenting and best wishes,

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