

Rheum

Polygonaceae

Rheum is derived from a Greek name for rhubarb *rheon*.

Some authorities claim that rhapontic rhubarb (*Rheum rhaponticum*) came to Britain from Russia in 1578 and was grown there as a medicinal and decorative garden plant. If this is correct there then seems to have been a black hole in Britain until the intervention of a Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce in the 18th Century. This Society took upon itself the promotion of the cultivation of rhubarb in Britain and awarded medals for it. It is understood that the first successful attempts to grow any rhubarb in Britain for medicinal purposes were made in about 1777 by a Mr. Hayward, an apothecary in Banbury (Oxfordshire). He had used seed (probably that of the rhapontic rhubarb, *Rheum rhaponticum*) which had been sent from Russia in 1762 and his crop which he called ‘genuine rhubarb’ was traded distinctively with the aid of men who wore a Turkish costume. After Mr. Hayward died his family maintained the ‘genuine rhubarb’ fields – eventually adding the species rhubarb (*Rheum officinale*) to their stock in 1873 and these latter fields continued to produce the latter species into the 20th Century.

A species of rhubarb provided one of the at least 36 ingredients used by Mithridates (c.132-63 BC), the 1st Century King of Pontus (northern Turkey), in a poison antidote (known as Antidotum Mithridaticum or Theriac) which he took daily to acquire an overall immunity – an important consideration if it is remembered that he gained his position of power by poisoning his opposition.