

*Rheum officinale*

**RHUBARB** is a perennial. Native to western China and to Tibet it has a small white flowers. It is also known as Chinese rhubarb, *Kelembak* (Malay), *Läkerabarber* (Swedish), Medicinal rhubarb, *Rabarber* (Dutch), *Rohtoraparperi* (Finnish), and Tibetan rhubarb.

Warning – rhubarb should not be taken internally during pregnancy or if suffering from kidney, liver or urinary disorders.

*Officinale* means ‘of the shop (usually the apothecary’s or herbalist’s)’. Certain plants used for medicinal purposes, whether of actual or legendary value, were kept readily available and acquired this name.

This is one of two species that have been of importance in Chinese medicine since about 2700 BC – the other being Chinghai rhubarb (*Rheum palmatum*). Both have been used to treat abdominal pains, constipation, indigestion, jaundice and other disorders for hundreds of years and today are still very highly regarded.

The drug obtained from them has been imported into the outskirts of Europe since the time of the early Greek empire – but it made little further progress towards western Europe until at least several centuries after the birth of Christ and it is believed that it was only in 1867 that it reached western Europe (unless the claims made by some authorities for the introduction of rhapontic rhubarb (*Rheum rhaponticum*) to Britain from Russia in 1578 are to be believed).

The rhubarb trading centre(s) moved several times and as a result various names relating to trading origin have been in vogue such as East Indian, Muscovite or Turkey rhubarbs. It then came to be cultivated on the western European mainland from 1867 onwards on a very small scale and this gave rise to yet more names eg. Bucharest, Dutch, English, French and German rhubarbs. None of these of course is the plant grown for its edible stems and familiar in Britain today ie. Garden rhubarb (*Rheum x hybridum*).

In Java (now part of Indonesia) it was used to treat freckles.

Today rhubarb is used as a bitter in tonic wines.

Medicinally, herbalists have recommended the root for treating diarrhoea, dysentery and indigestion. In Chinese medicine it has long been used as a tonic taken after childbirth.