

*Rheum palmatum*

**CHINGHAI RHUBARB** is a perennial. Native to north-eastern Asia it has small reddish-green or whitish flowers.

It is also known as China rhubarb, Chinese rhubarb, Chinese root, East Indian rhubarb, *Flikrabarber* (Swedish), High-dried Rhubarb, *Koristeraparperi* (Finnish), *Medizinalrhabarber* (German), Ornamental rhubarb, *Rebarbora dlaňovitá* (Slovak), *Reumo palmata* (Esperanto), *Revand cheei* (Urdu), *Reveň dlanitá* (Czech), *Rhabarber* (German), Rhubarb, *Ruibarbo* (Spanish), Shop rhubarb, Sorrel rhubarb, Turkey rhubarb, Turkish rhubarb, and Turkish root.

Warning – it should not be taken internally if suffering from kidney or liver disorders, arthritis or rheumatism, or by nursing mothers. The leaf stalks are also poisonous.

*Palmatum* means ‘lobed like an open hand with outstretched fingers or hand-like’.

Together with some other varieties developed from it, Chinghai rhubarb is thought to be the probable main source of medicinal rhubarb in Europe.

Some say this species reached Europe in 1763 but others point to Hermann Boerhaave (1668-1738) the celebrated Dutch physician and botanist, who is said to have acquired seeds from a Tartarian rhubarb merchant. In any event it came to be cultivated commercially on the European Continent – and still is in Germany and Russia. It is understood that the drug obtained from the European plants does not compare however with that from the Chinese source.

In 2700 BC when it had long been used medicinally (not least to treat constipation) the Chinese herbal, *Pen-King* referred to the drug as *Ta-huang* which means ‘great yellow’ as a reflection of both its colour and reputation. (There are some modern authorities are dubious about the validity of this herbal.) For a further 2000 years traders obtaining the drug in the province of Kansu and in Tibet perpetuated that name.

The dried underground stem is used as a bitter in some tonic wines and can be an ingredient in liqueurs.

Chinghai rhubarb is occasionally grown today as an ornamental garden plant and is commercially cultivated in China, central Europe, Germany and Russia.

Medicinally, herbalists have recommended the root for treating diarrhoea, dysentery and indigestion. Today it can be an ingredient in some proprietary medicines.