

*Rheum rhaponticum*

**RHAPONTIC RHUBARB** is a perennial. Probably native to southern Siberia or to Norway it has small whitish flowers.

It is also known as English rhubarb, False rhubarb, *Munkrabarber* (Swedish), Pie plant, *Reveň bulharská* (Czech), Rhubarb pie plant, Siberian rhubarb, and *Vildrabarber* (Swedish); and in flower language it is said to be a symbol of advice.

Warning – the leaves are poisonous. The symptoms can include diarrhoea, vomiting, impaired blood clotting and death. It can be poisonous for some animals particularly pigs and goats.

*Rhaponticum* is derived for some authorities from Greek *rha* (root) and *ponticum* components meaning ‘roots of Pontus (north-eastern Turkey)’, and for others a Latin reference to the river Rha (now the Volga) which spills into the Pontus (Black Sea). This is amplified in one suggested explanation of the name Rhubarb that could be derived from *Rhabarbarum* meaning in Latin ‘Rha of the barbarians’, in other words the plant was cultivated by barbarians (or Tartars) on the banks of the Rha. However another explanation of Rhubarb relies upon the river Volta (not Volga) and *barbarum* defined as ‘foreigner’ yielding ‘of the foreigners via the Volta’ ie. the Chinese (being the foreigners) introduced rhubarb via the trade route along the Volta.

Some authorities believe that it was initially introduced to western Europe in 1608 (probably from Tibet) and was first cultivated there at the botanic gardens in Padua.. It came to Britain from Russia in 1578 and was grown there as a medicinal and decorative garden plant

In the Philippines the leaf stalks have been cooked in pies or have provided an ingredient for sauces. [In Britain it is not the leafstalks of this species but those of the garden rhubarb, *Rheum x hybridum*, that are eaten.] North American Cherokee Indians have also eaten rhapontic rhubarb.

The Cherokee North American tribe have used the plant as a laxative and a treatment for dysentery.

Medicinally, herbalists used to recommend a preparation made from the root for strengthening nails. The seeds were used to treat stomach-ache, and distilled water was believed to be a remedy for scabs, sore throats and earache. The plant was also used in the treatment of gout, cramp and blood clots.

It is the birthday flower for 25<sup>th</sup> May.