

Rheum x hybridum

[Synonyms : *Rheum x cultorum*, *Rheum rhaponticum*, *Rheum rhabarbarum*, *Rheum undulatum*]

GARDEN RHUBARB is a perennial variety. It has greenish-white flowers.

It is also known as Bastard rhubarb, Common rhubarb, *Matrabarber* (Swedish), Pie plant, *Rabarbaro* (Italian), *Rabarber* (Swedish), *Rabarbo-reumo* (Esperanto), *Raparperi* (Finnish), *Reveň kadeřavá* (Czech), *Reveň rebarbora* (Czech), *Rhabarber* (German), Rhubarb, *Rhubarbe* (French), and Sweet round-leaved dock: and in flower language is said to be a symbol of advice.

Warning – the root must never be taken internally as it exerts a hormonal influence on human beings. The leaves cannot be taken internally either as they can cause fluctuating abdominal pain, nausea, reduced blood clotting, vomiting, muscular twitching, convulsions, jaundice, liver and kidney damage and weakness before death. The plant is also poisonous for some animals.

Hybridum means ‘hybrid or mixed’.

This rhubarb with its edible leaf stalks was probably derived from rhapontic rhubarb (*Rheum rhaponticum*).

Garden rhubarb was introduced to North America at some point and according to records the stems came to be prepared as food by the Hanaksiala, Haisla and Kitasoo Indians as in Europe. The latter used them in pies and for making jam.

The English were the first to use garden rhubarb in the kitchen and during these initial culinary experiments mistakenly ate the leaves (they contain oxalic acid). By the 1840s it was beginning to be realized that the leaves could be poisonous. At that time the French were also cooking the leaves and used them in soup. In 1872 it was learnt that across the Atlantic in North America deaths from eating the leaves had been recorded. The debate on the poisonous nature of these leaves rumbled on and in the meantime renewed interest in using them as a vegetable was sparked in 1899. Then in December 1910 the *British Medical Journal* referred to cases of rhubarb poisoning. Surprisingly despite this open debate it is understood that the leaves were officially recommended as a vegetable in Britain during World War I. Use of only the leaf stems as a ‘fruit’ became more widespread in Britain in about the 1920s. Today cooks automatically discard the leaves (without necessarily realizing that they are poisonous) and prepare only the stems.

The dried powdered roots can be used to lighten blond hair.

Garden rhubarb has no identified medicinal value.