Ravishing rhubarb

It’s almost rhubarb season, so get ready to enjoy some fresh rhubarb. Rhubarb can be chopped and cooked for desserts, custards, pie, and sauces. Rhubarb is a good source of vitamins A and C.

Choose fresh, firm rhubarb stems with a bright, glossy appearance with a large amount of pink or red color. However, many good quality stems will be predominantly light green. Avoid very slender, or extremely thick stems, to insure the stem is not tough and stringy, but is tender. Reject rhubarb that is soft, dull looking, scarred or has brown or black ends. Do not eat rhubarb leaves, since they are poisonous in large quantities.

Rhubarb stalks can be wrapped in plastic and stored in the refrigerator for a week. For longer storage, rhubarb may be frozen, canned, or made into jelly.

The quality of the preserved rhubarb is dependent on the quality of the fresh product. Firm tender stalks with good flavor and color and few fibers work best.

Freezing. Wash, trim, and cut the stalks into a size to fit the freezer container. For better color and flavor, blanch the rhubarb by placing in boiling water for one minute, then placing in cool water promptly to stop the cooking. Raw or blanched rhubarb can be packed dry, or with a syrup for freezing. If a syrup is used, prepare a cold 40% syrup, (2 ¼ cups of sugar dissolved in 4 cups of water). Leave head space, then seal the package and freeze.

Canning. If large amounts of rhubarb are available, consider canning rhubarb. Prepare about 10½ pounds to fill a seven quart canner. Trim leaves, wash stalks and cut into ½- to 1-inch pieces. In a large saucepan, add ½ cup sugar for each quart of rhubarb. Let the rhubarb and sugar mixture stand until juice appears. Heat gently, until mixture boils. Immediately pack rhubarb mixture into hot, clean, sterile jars, leaving ½-inch headspace. Remove air bubbles. Wipe jar rims. Adjust lids. Process pints or quarts in a boiling water bath canner for 15 minutes at altitudes under 1,000 feet, or 20 minutes at 1,001-6,000 ft. For pressure canning, process 8 minutes at 6 pounds of pressure at altitudes up to 2,000 ft.

Planting. Rhubarb is planted in this part of Missouri in early to mid-April. When planting, plan for 2 to 3 plants per person to be consumed fresh. If preserving rhubarb, plant an additional 2 to 3 plants per person. Rhubarb should not be harvested the first year. The leaves of the rhubarb plant should never be eaten.

Cool stuff about rhubarb!

Rhubarb's nickname is the “pie-plant”, because that is the primary use for this vegetable.

Even though Americans are fond of making rhubarb pies, jams, jellies, and other sweet treats, it was first used by the Chinese about 4,700 years ago for medicinal purposes.

The dried root was used to cause vomiting, cure constipation, and as a blood purifier. People did not start eating the rhubarb stalks until the early 1800's, probably because those people who first tried rhubarb leaves got sick and died. Rhubarb leaves can be poisonous because they contain a substance called oxalate. NEVER eat the leaves cooked or raw!

The color of rhubarb stalks will determine the taste. Green stalks with green flesh are very sour and are good for jams and jellies. Red stalks with green flesh are slightly tangy and less sour; they are good for cake fillings or cookie fillings. Red stalks with red flesh have a sweeter flavor, or a slight raspberry flavor, this variety is good in fruit salads, or fruit tarts or pies. Generally, the deeper the red color, the sweeter the rhubarb will be!


Seasonal and Simple is a guide to help you select, store and prepare fresh fruits and vegetables. The recipes use simple preparations and seasonings, so you can taste the goodness of a fruit or vegetable at the peak of its flavor. The fruits and vegetables are listed in the guide by their growing season — spring, summer and fall. Nutrients and associated health benefits are listed with each fruit or vegetable.

Use this guide to choose fruits and vegetables in season and get all the benefits — food that tastes good, is good for you and this guide is reasonably priced at $15.00 per copy.

Planning for water-bath canning

Few things are more irritating than starting a project, and realizing needed equipment, supplies, or ingredients are not available. Before starting, read the canning instructions and think about the ingredients and equipment needed.

As canning season begins, gather equipment together and check to be sure it is in good working order. Do a trial run on the canner. Make sure the canner is in good shape and the lid fits well to prevent heat from escaping.

Before canning with quart jars, make sure the canner is deep enough to have 2-inches of boiling water over jars when they are on the rack. Some canners look deep enough, but lack enough height to allow water to cover quart jars and boil without spilling over when they are on the rack.

Canners need to have a rack to keep jars from sitting directly on the bottom of the can. Jars could break if they are exposed directly to heat, and water would not be able to circulate freely around jars. If the rack is missing, purchase a metal, round cake cooling rack and place in bottom of canner. For an alternative instant rack, place jar rings over entire bottom of canner. Place filled jars on top of this simple rack to keep jars off bottom of canner.

Canning jars are an obvious essential for home canning. Check jars on hand for cracks or nicks in the glass. Even a slight crack can lead to breakage of jars when heated, and a tiny nick in a jar can prevent jars from sealing or remaining sealed. Jars not designed for home canning are not as strong and may have been damaged by knives, or other metal utensils, making jar breakage more likely. Even canning jars that have been used for storage or drinking, are more likely to have been damaged, thus are more likely to break during processing. This is a bigger issue during pressure canning, since it may cause the water level to get too high in the canner.

An ample supply of canning bands and lids are also necessary. If bands are not rusty or bent, they are reusable. The flat lids are not reusable. Flat lids are not very expensive, so always have extras available when canning. If a flat lid has a nick in the sealing compound, do not use it. Extra lids will prevent the necessity of using any damaged lids, and will be useful if any jars do not seal and need reprocessing.

Other pieces of equipment useful during canning are: a pan for extra hot water, a pan for heating jar lids, timer, jar lifter, canning funnel, spatula or bubble remover, lid wand, pot holders, kitchen towels, ladle, measuring cups, and measuring spoons. Some products will require canning salt, bottled lemon juice, vinegar, citric acid, or sugar.

Other useful items in preparing may be: cutting boards, knives, colander, grater, corer, food mill, jelly bag, cheesecloth, scales, spatulas, and spoons for stirring. Not all of these items will be needed for everything, but this list is a reminder of items that might be needed.

Remember—Planning is the most important part of canning!

Source: Adapted from Ball® Blue Book guide to preserving, Judy Lueders, Nutrition and Health Specialist, University of Missouri Extension.
Strawberry-Rhubarb Jelly

- 1-1/2 lbs. red stalks of rhubarb
- 1-1/2 qts. ripe strawberries
- 1/2 tsp. butter or margarine
- 6 cups sugar
- 6 oz. liquid pectin

Procedure:

Wash and cut rhubarb into 1-inch pieces and blend or grind. Wash, stem and crush strawberries, one layer at a time, in a saucepan. Place both fruits in a jelly bag, or double layer of cheesecloth, and gently squeeze out juice. Measure 3-1/2 cups of juice into a large saucepan. Add butter and sugar, thoroughly mixing into juice. Bring to a boil over high heat, stirring constantly. Immediately stir in pectin. Bring to a full rolling boil and boil hard 1 minute, stirring constantly. Remove from heat, quickly skim off foam, and fill sterile jars, leaving 1-inch headspace. Wipe rims of jars with a dampened clean paper towel. Adjust lids and process. Pints or half-pints should be processed for five minutes at altitudes of 1,000 feet and below, or ten minutes at 1,000 to 6,000 feet above sea level.


Quality for Keeps, published monthly, April through October, is made available to residents of East Central and Southeast Missouri by their Extension Councils. Contact your county Extension office to subscribe, or visit our website http://missouri.extension.edu/franklin. Questions may be directed to:

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