



Kevin Milaeger

Milaeger's

A Little Chilly, but it's Rhubarb Time!

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We continue to wait for the warm weather, when we can safely plant the heat loving (requiring) vegetables that are the favorites of many gardeners---tomato, pepper, cucumber, summer squash, and eggplant.

These five are the top selling vegetable plants at Milaeger's. These are all of subtropical origin so if you want to plant them now (I wouldn't) then you will need some kind of protection from the cool weather we are bound to get. I planted a few anyway (on May 4th), just as a test of a product called the "Season Extender," sometimes known as the "Wall O' Water." The water in this



product serves as an insulator to protect the plants. Of course, I wouldn't plant these plants in my home garden this early; I am only doing it for research (wink wink). Last year I planted some tomato, pepper and cucumber plants early. I protected half of them, and left the others unprotected. The "Season Extender" did its job well; the protected plants grew fine---none were harmed by the cold weather. But, although the protection was a success, some plants that I put in later, at the normal planting time, caught up to the early ones, and bore fruit at the same time. Although the "Season Extender" worked, it was not a clear advantage, in terms of getting a jump on the season. Now, I don't recall much from high school science classes, but one thing I remember is that you



must do an experiment over and over to verify the results. So I am once again dutifully planting tender plants early and protecting them; we'll see how this year's results compare. [Here is a link](#) to my discussion of last year's project.

Rather than plant too soon, I like to focus on those plants that thrive in the cool, early spring weather (like lettuce), or on other chores. I just picked rhubarb for the first time this year. Rhubarb is one of the few perennials in the vegetable garden

(asparagus and horseradish are two others.) Perennials are hardy plants that survive winter and come up year after year. Rhubarb is native to China, where it has been used and cultivated for thousands of years. For most of that time, its use was medicinal



use, not culinary. The powdered root was used as a purgative. By the 1700's, rhubarb was cultivated throughout Europe, and was consumed primarily as a dessert. The reason for its increase in use was the relatively new phenomenon of low cost sugar. Rhubarb was too tart for most people, so when sugar became affordable, it was added to rhubarb, and rhubarb's unique flavor became more palatable. At my house we just make simple rhubarb sauce, but my mom is famous for her rhubarb pie and torte. [Here is a link](#) to her recipe for torte. Yum!



Although there are many varieties of rhubarb, very few are commonly available. Most gardeners don't refer to them by their names, but usually by color---red or green. We have a spectacular red variety known as 'Crimson Red.' This is the most popular variety; the rich red color is eye catching. It looks good in the garden, and adds color to your table. The second variety we offer is 'Victoria.' This is a mostly green variety, with some red flushing on the stalks. People argue about which has the better flavor, and which tastes more like true rhubarb. But, if you taste



Rhubarb Crimson Red

either one you will have no trouble identifying each of them as rhubarb. Why not grow one or more of each?

Rhubarb is easy to grow. Give it a sunny spot; pretty much any decent soil will suffice, but it wouldn't hurt to add some compost. You won't harvest any the first season that you plant it, and very little the second. But in the third year you should have enough for a couple of pies, and maybe more. Be patient; enjoy the plant's beauty while you wait. Rhubarb's ornamental value is often overlooked. With its big, bold, textured leaves and brightly colored stalks, it is quite a sight. The bizarre flower cluster, atop a thick stalk, is also something to see (but if you remove the flower stalk you will extend the harvest season.) In fact, I see no reason why you couldn't put a couple of rhubarb plants in your perennial garden and harvest the stalks from there. Wherever you plant it, be prepared to give it plenty of room. They can grow up to 48" in diameter in just a few years. But that's not too much of a good thing.



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