



rhubarb revival

Lynda Hallinan discovers a free liquid fertiliser that miraculously revitalises her rather sad rhubarb

Did the world's fastest Indian grow rhubarb in his Southland plot? I have no idea, but I think of Burt Munro every time I walk past the bed of robust, red-stalked rhubarb at the edge of the deck beside my front door.

I'm not skiting. I'm simply surprised by my rhubarb's sudden resurrection. For the whole of last year, I rued my decision to plant it in such a visible spot because it was such a miserable eyesore.

Things got off to a bad start when our chooks raided the bed in early winter and pecked the leaves to bits. (Hens, for some peculiar reason, appear immune to the toxic oxalic acid in the foliage.)

If that brutal attack wasn't enough, it then rained every day for months on end, drowning the mangled stumps and turning the skimpy stalks to pink mush.

I held little hope my rhubarb would shoot away in spring. It didn't die, but it didn't grow much either. It simply sulked, making a lie of my theory that rhubarb is one of the easiest edible crops to grow. (It's definitely one of those beginner's luck crops. The first year you plant it, it'll produce leaves like elephant ears and stalks as fat as walking sticks. But it's all downhill from there, as rhubarb is such a greedy plant that it only takes a season to scoff all the goodness in your soil.)

So what changed the fortunes of my rhubarb crop? The Hunk's stag do. When nature called – as it has a habit of doing, repeatedly, when blokes drink copious quantities of beer – my rhubarb answered. Another reason, in hindsight, why planting it at the edge of the deck may not have been a smart move.

What is it with men peeing on plants? On *Maggie's Garden Show*, the late Prof Walker cheekily unzipped his trousers to fertilise his sweetcorn, while Burt Munro famously targeted citrus trees. It sure does the trick for scungy rhubarb too. My plants have never looked better. Not that I'll be eating any for a while.

Rhubarb is what's known in the trade as a "gross feeder". Like passionfruit, you can't overfeed it. Pile on sheep pellets, compost and old chicken manure or fork in a generous handful of slow-release fertiliser in spring and autumn. Keep it moist throughout summer with regular watering and a thick layer of mulch too.

Rhubarb is perennial so once you've got a good clump going, you've got it for years. Try to resist picking any stalks in its first season – let the plant concentrate on root and crown development. There's no need to dig it up and divide it every year, or even every second year. It only needs dividing if it loses vigour.

In frosty climates, rhubarb ducks for cover during winter. Tuck the dormant crowns under a blanket of pea straw. In mild areas, it's generally evergreen.

Speaking of evergreen rhubarb, there's a common green-stalked variety that doesn't ripen to dark red. At best, it turns pinkish-green. 'Glaskins Perpetual' and 'Victoria' are the most popular red types, though as most plants are raised by seed these days (instead of being propagated by division), don't be surprised if your rhubarb isn't as red as it appears on the label. For ruby red stems, find a friend with an established clump – and beg them to part with a piece to plant. 🍷

When harvesting rhubarb, slide your hand down to the base of the ripe outer stalks and gently pull or twist off. Don't cut the stalks with a knife, as the cut ends will roll back and rot against the crown of the plant. Rhubarb, even when fully ripe, needs sweetening. To cut down on your sugar intake, stew the stems in a little lemon juice and water, then add sugar when cooked. Or stew with a few leaves of *Stevia rebaudiana*, the so-called sugar herb, or stems of *Angelica archangelica*. Both are natural sweeteners.

Top crops

- **'LIBERTY' APPLES:** Eighteen months after planting, my orchard is bearing fruit. 'Liberty' (above) is a real looker with red skins, on bendy branches weighed down with fruit. I should have thinned them but couldn't bear to sacrifice a single apple.
- **ASPARAGUS:** My fledgling asparagus plot looks as lush as a Victorian fernery. I took Canterbury commercial asparagus grower Peter Falloon's advice and waited until the soil warmed up before I planted the crowns last September. It paid off handsomely. I didn't lose a single crown in the wet winter soil and the ferns are now at least 1m high and wide. It all bodes well for a wicked harvest next spring.
- **GARLIC:** For the first time, I've actually grown enough garlic to see me through until next year. The secret to big, fat, healthy bulbs is definitely in the soil. Mine were planted in deep, compost-enriched soil, with fortnightly feeds of Veg-E-Boost from late spring until early summer.
- **CAPSICUMS:** I mulched my plants with 10cm of sawdust (I was cleaning out the stables). It kept the roots cool and moist, promoting fat, fleshy peppers.

Flop crops

- **'INITIAL' APPLES:** I can't fault this prolific, disease-resistant, modern variety (below) for performance or flavour, but I've struck a snag with my choice of planting location. I put in a row of five 'Initial' trees (along with 'Damsun' plums and 'Griottella' sour cherries) in an old cattleyard that was later converted to a chook run. In hindsight, it wasn't my smartest move to shift the chooks, as my apple trees are grafted on dwarf rootstock... so the fruit is now ripening at beak height. At least it's fun to watch the hens bobbing for apples.

