

## **Food ideas: Rhubarb**

Rhubarb is, strictly speaking, a vegetable rather than a fruit because we eat its stems rather than its fruit. Its leaves contain oxalic acid and so are poisonous (though you'd need to eat a lot of them to get impressively ill), but its stalks are rich in vitamin C, fibre and calcium. So wonderful is rhubarb that Wakefield and Burwell (Cambs.) hold an annual festival in its honour.

Although I'm not overwhelmed enough by rhubarb to propose that we should start our own festival, I am very fond of it because it is the first real 'spring food' that shows up in my garden. It is also a fantastically low-care plant: its big leaves shade out other plants so there's no need to weed, it seems to thrive in most soils, and it only needs the odd bit of fertilizer or compost to keep it going year after year.

That said, rhubarb does need a lot of sugar to become palatable, and it doesn't have a huge range of uses. Here are some of my favourites:

Rhubarb mush: Gently heat up 4-6 chopped-up rhubarb stems with about half a cup of sugar (or more if you have a sweet tooth) and a small quantity of water until the rhubarb is soft, about 15 minutes. If you like, you can add small chopped-up pieces of fresh or crystallised ginger, or chopped-up rosemary before cooking. Let the mixture cool, drain off most of the liquid, and eat with yoghurt, crème fraîche, muesli or ice cream. The acid in the rhubarb causes milk to curdle, so it's best not to combine the two. Rhubarb mush can be frozen and stored for later consumption.

Rhubarb ice cream: Whip together a can of concentrated milk and a similar quantity of whipping cream until the mixture forms soft peaks. This mixture can be used as a base for all kinds of flavours (bits of chocolate, chopped up mint etc.). For rhubarb ice cream, gently stir in a cup of rhubarb mush. Place in the freezer until the mixture is hard. There is no need to stir it during the freezing process or to use an ice cream maker.

Rhubarb and rosemary cake: On the hob, gently heat up two tablespoons each of sugar and butter until the mixture starts to turn brown (caramelize). Chop three large rhubarb stems into one inch pieces. Arrange them vertically in tightly-packed little columns on the bottom of the tin. In a separate bowl, mix together 2 cups of self-raising flour, one cup of sugar, an egg, several springs of chopped-up rosemary, and enough milk to make the mixture quite runny (about half a cup). Spoon this mixture gently over the rhubarb columns. Bake at about gas 5 for 40 minutes, until the top is brown. Flip the cake upside down onto a plate so that the base of the rhubarb columns is revealed. Let it cool and serve with yoghurt or ice cream.