

## A Love Letter to Rhubarb

Some people will acknowledge spring's arrival with the sighting of their first robin. Others by the synchronized unfurling of hard, tight buds on their trees. Me? I'm more of a bud watcher than a bird watcher, and the bud I watch for is the forsythia, its overnight explosion of lemony yellow flowers on previously spindly, bare branches. Once that happens, the air smells fresher to me, sweeter; spring is almost a sure thing.

But only almost. After a long and cold winter, I need a little more convincing. I need to see some rhubarb – shooting up from the ground, fanning out in clusters, its stalks ranging from palest celadon to vibrant raspberry pink, the crowning touch the ruffled elephant ear-like leaves.

Rhubarb, rhubarb, how do I love thee? Let me count the ways.

I love you, soft and caramelized, on the upside down part of an upside down cake. I love you preserved as a jam. Or bottled into a chutney with walnuts and raisins and brown sugar and a splash of cider vinegar. I love you sweetened just the slightest bit and stewed or blended into a fruit sauce still tart enough to make my mouth pucker. And of course I love you on your own in a pie, your juices thickened and rosy pink, but you're equally loveable thrown into a pie that's been made sweeter and ruby colored with the addition of strawberries.

And I have a special fondness for you cut up, drizzled with honey and lemon juice, and scattered around the pork loin that's just about to go in my oven; I love the resulting relish you will cook down to. Rhubarb, you bridge sweet and savory with your bright astringency.

Sprouting like crazy from now through the beginning of June, rhubarb also bridges the early and late parts of spring, helping to freshen up meals and desserts and palates, a true warm up act to the bounty of late spring and summer. You've probably already seen some rhubarb in your market. Grab what you can when you do, looking for nice firm stalks with shiny skins, and make something wonderful immediately.

If you're lucky enough to grow your own (or to know someone who does), you can stroll into the garden and take what you need for the recipe of the moment. To use, cut the stalks just above the root end, then trim and discard the leaves. (Rhubarb leaves contain oxalic acid, toxic to humans if ingested in large quantities.) After washing, cut the rhubarb stalks into pieces anywhere from 1/4-inch to 1/2-inch thick. Your fresh rhubarb is now recipe ready.

You may notice that once cut, rhubarb tends to replenish itself rather quickly this time of the year, with new stalks shooting up as replacements. You may end up with more rhubarb than you think you will use at the moment. Rhubarb can feel like the zucchini of the spring. On the off chance you can't give some away, rhubarb freezes very well. Trim, wash, cut up as described above, and freeze in heavy-duty freezer bags. For the next three months you'll have prepared rhubarb on hand to cook with.

This is my absolutely favorite way to eat rhubarb:

## **Rhubarb Crumble**

### **Ingredients**

8 cups cut up rhubarb  
1 Tbsp. water or lemon juice  
1 Tbsp. flour  
1 Tbsp. sugar  
1 cup flour  
½ cup whole rolled oats  
6 Tbsp. golden brown sugar, firmly packed  
6 Tbsp. white sugar  
1 tsp. finely grated lemon zest  
½ tsp. salt  
½ tsp. cinnamon  
1 stick plus 2 Tbsp. unsalted butter, melted

### **Method**

Preheat the oven to 35 degrees and butter a large oval or rectangular baking dish. Place the rhubarb pieces into the baking dish. Sprinkle with juice, flour and sugar, and toss a bit to coat. Set dish aside while you make the topping.

Whisk flour, oats, brown sugar, white sugar, lemon peel, and salt together in a medium bowl to blend. Add to this the melted butter and vanilla, and stir together until streusel is evenly moistened but still clumpy.

Using your fingers, crumble the topping over the fruit, distributing across the top evenly. Bake until topping is golden brown, rhubarb pieces when pierced with a knife are soft, and the rhubarb's juices are thickened and bubbling, about 45–60 minutes.

Serve warm with vanilla ice cream.

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