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THE EXTREME VEGETABLE - RHUBARB
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It's rhubarb time, and don't miss out on those tart crimson stalks that look like celery – but aren't. Rhubarb is available right now and it's wonderful paired with that other crimson star of the season, sweet strawberries. Only eat the stalk of rhubarb, as the leaves and roots are toxic. Rhubarb is low in calories but needs the addition of sugar to offset its extreme acidity and tartness. It adds tartness to pies, tarts, cold soups, jam, and other desserts. In the U.S., it is often paired with strawberries; in England, paired with ginger, and in France, pureed into a sauce and paired with fish.

Use a vegetable peeler to remove any brown or scaly spots on rhubarb. It is not necessary to peel the entire stalk; trim the ends and wash and dry the stalks.

Always use a non-reactive pan for cooking this high acid vegetable. Use glass, stainless steel, or enamel-coated cast iron cookware. The interaction of acidic rhubarb cooked in reactive metal pots (aluminum, iron, and copper) will turn the rhubarb an unappetizing brown color. Metal ions flaking off the pan will interact with acids in the fruit to form brown compounds that darken both the pan and the rhubarb.

Rhubarb is best preserved by freezing. Chop into 1/2-inch pieces, spread on a sheet pan and place in the freezer. Once frozen, put the rhubarb into heavy-duty plastic freezer bags. Press out air, seal tightly and put back into the freezer. Packed this way, rhubarb will keep for up to six months, and can be measured from the freezer bag.

Make some Strawberry-Rhubarb Jelly and enjoy it all year long. Don't forget to increase canning time for higher altitudes, as indicated in the recipe below. This jelly should be canned in pints or half-pints. Yields approximately 7 half-pints.

Strawberry-Rhubarb Jelly with Pectin

1 ½ lbs red stalks of rhubarb
1 ½ quarts ripe strawberries
1/2 tsp butter or margarine (optional ingredient to reduce foaming)
6 cups sugar
6 oz liquid pectin (2 pouches)

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 large saucepan and simmer for 10 minutes. Strain juice with a jelly bag or double layer of cheesecloth. Combine and mix 3½ cups of juice and sugar. Add butter if desired. Bring to a boil over high heat, stirring constantly. Immediately stir in pectin. Bring to a full rolling boil and boil hard for 1 minute, stirring constantly. Remove from heat and quickly skim off foam and fill into sterile half-pint jars, leaving ¼ -inch headspace. Adjust lids and process according to these recommendations: 10 minutes at altitudes of 0-1,000 feet; 15 minutes at altitudes of 1,001 – 6,000 feet; and 20 minutes at altitudes above 6,000 feet.

For questions about safe home food preservation, or to schedule a speaker for organizations or clubs on the topics of food safety or food preservation, call the Master Food Preservers at (530) 621-5506.

For more information, be sure to go to the Master Food Preserver website at http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.org/Master_Food_Preservers/. Sign up to receive our Master Food Preservers E-Newsletter at <http://ucanr.org/mfpenews/>.

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Sources:

http://nchfp.uga.edu/publications/penn_state/penn_state_jellies_jams.pdf

<http://urbanext.illinois.edu/veggies/rhubarb.cfm>