

Giant-rhubarbs

Species Description

Scientific names: *Gunnera* species

AKA:

Native to: South America

Habitat: Damp grassland, woodland and shaded areas near water

Large, clump-forming perennials with stout horizontal stems known as rhizomes, massive umbrella-sized leaves and stems up to 2 m tall. Over winter the plant dies down but grows new leaves in spring. Two species are found in the UK: Giant-rhubarb (also known as Chilean giant-rhubarb) *Gunnera tinctoria* and Brazilian giant-rhubarb *Gunnera manicata*.

Native to South America, they were introduced to the UK as ornamental plants and giant-rhubarb is now often self-sown where long-established and has naturalised in scattered locations throughout much of lowland UK. Brazilian giant-rhubarb, although fertile in the UK has not been found self sown and is scarcely naturalised.

Once established, they can be very invasive and form dense colonies, suppressing native plants as the large leaves prevent other plants growing underneath them. They can also impede water flow through the obstruction of drainage in adjacent streams and rivers particularly when water levels are high.

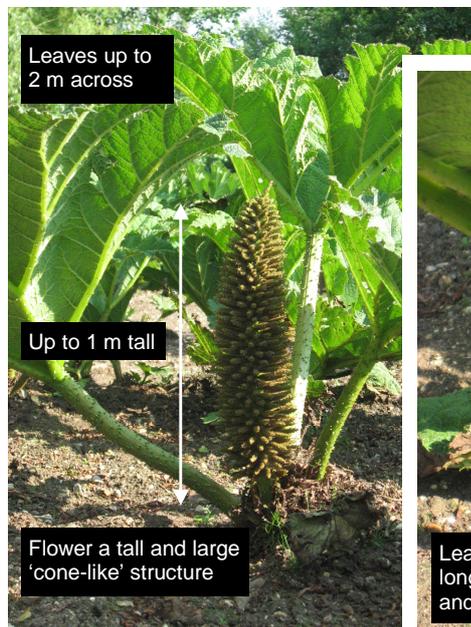
Giant rhubarb is listed under Schedule 9 to the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 with respect to England and Wales. As such, it is an offence to plant or otherwise allow this species to grow in the wild.

For details of legislation go to www.nonnativespecies.org/legislation.



Key ID Features

Brazilian giant-rhubarb is very similar to giant-rhubarb with leaves reaching over 2 m across, leaf stalks with reddish bristles and spines and the inflorescence up to 1.2 m tall.



Identification throughout the year

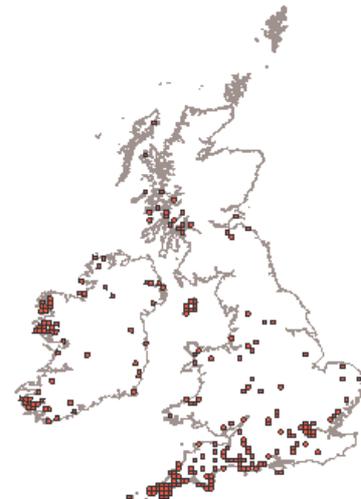
Can be identified at most times of the year, in summer by its large leaves and distinctive flowers (June — August), in winter by the prostrate rhizomes and dead leaf



Distribution

Giant-rhubarb is spread throughout lowland areas especially in south-west England. Brazilian giant-rhubarb is found in widely scattered localities.

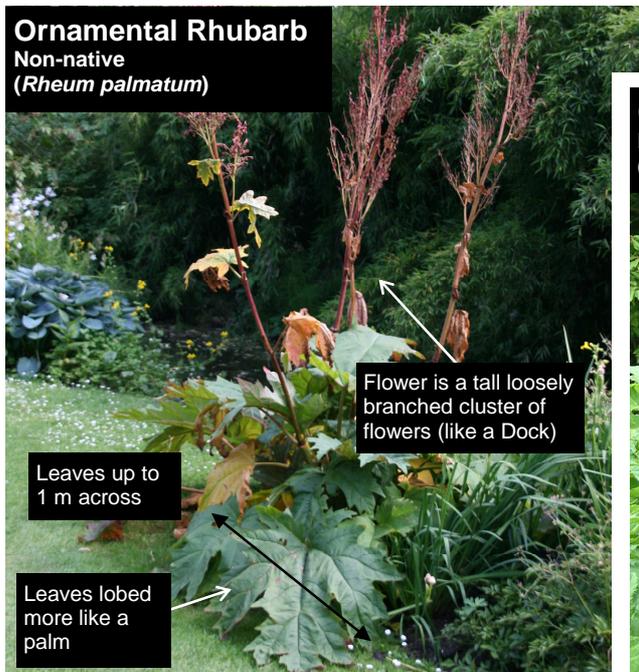
Source: NBN Gateway. Check website for current distribution



Similar Species

Giant-rhubarb can be mistaken for several other species with large leaves, especially early in the year when only the new leaves are present. The tall flower stalks are very distinctive.

Ornamental Rhubarb
Non-native
(*Rheum palmatum*)



Leaves up to 1 m across

Leaves lobed more like a palm

Flower is a tall loosely branched cluster of flowers (like a Dock)

Giant Hogweed
Non-native
(*Heracleum mantegazzianum*)



Leaves up to 2.5 m across

More divided, lobed leaves



Distinctive umbrella-shaped flowers. Plant up to 5 m high

Cultivated Rhubarb
Non-native
(*Rheum x hybridum*)



Leaves not strongly lobed

Leaves up to 1 m across

References and further reading:

Preston, C D, Pearman, D A and Dines, T A (editors) (2002) "New Atlas of the British and Irish Flora". Oxford University Press

Stace, C (1999) "Field Flora of the British Isles". Cambridge University Press