



Rhubarb: The Wondrous Drug (Princeton Legacy Library)

Clifford M. Foust

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An Asian plant with mysterious cathartic powers, medicinal rhubarb spurred European trade expeditions and obsessive scientific inquiry from the Renaissance until the twentieth century. Rarely, however, had there been a plant that so thoroughly frustrated Europeans' efforts to acquire it and to master its special botanical and chemical properties. Here Clifford Foust presents the remarkable efforts of the explorers, traders, botanists, gardeners, physicians, and pharmacists who tried to adapt rhubarb for convenient use in Europe. His is an intriguing tale of how humans and their institutions have been affected by natural realities they do not entirely comprehend. Readers interested in the history of medicine, pharmaceuticals, botany, or horticulture will be fascinated by this once-perplexing plant: highly valued by physicians for its cathartic properties, rhubarb resisted revealing its active chemical principles, had many widely varying species, and did not breed true by seed. This history includes sections on the geographic and economic importance of rhubarb--which explain how the plant became a major state monopoly for Russia and an important commodity for the East India companies--and a discussion of rhubarb's emergence as an international culinary craze during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Originally published in 1992.

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