

## Giant Rhubarb

**Latin name: *Gunnera tinctoria***

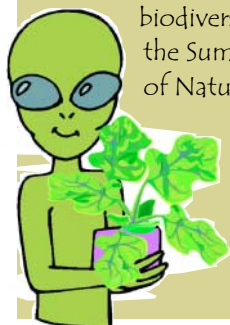
Giant Rhubarb is a plant which is native to South America. It has large, leathery umbrella-shaped leaves and thick stems (spikes cover the stems and the back of the leaves). The plant can grow up to about 2 metres high and can form large, dense colonies. It is an herbaceous plant, which means its leaves and stems die down at the end of the growing season to soil level. It is also perennial, growing back every year. Though it is similar in appearance to rhubarb, it is not related.

The plant was introduced into Ireland about 100 years ago, mostly likely as an ornamental plant for the garden. Since its introduction, it has escaped into the wild and has become a big problem in some areas of the country, particularly in the west of Ireland. The growing conditions there are very similar to those in its native home – warm and damp. As it has ideal conditions in which to grow, and its large leaves and early appearance in spring prevents native plants from growing, it has begun to take over large areas of ground. Native plants are being forced out of areas where it grows.

### An Alien Species

In Ireland, Giant Rhubarb, or *Gunnera*, is considered an alien species and it is also considered an invasive species. Its invasive behaviour is destroying the habitats of native animals and plants and upsetting the natural biodiversity of certain areas. To learn more about what

biodiversity is, check out the Summer 2010 issue of Nature's Web. You can also learn about other invasive species on page 14 of this issue.



Giant Rhubarb (also known as Chilean rhubarb), growing in Chile National Park, on the coast of Chile.

### Why is it hard to control?

The plant grows from a horizontal plant stem, known as a rhizome. Underneath the ground the rhizome roots and above the ground it sends up shoots. These rhizomes can grow to 2 metres in length. The plant can reproduce from tiny fragments of the rhizome and also from seed. The flowerhead can produce over 250,000 seeds a year. This has allowed it to spread quickly and makes it hard to get rid of. Those working to stop the spread of the plant have to be extremely carefully how they go about it. They cannot simply dig it up as breaking the rhizome only creates more plants.



Giant Rhubarb has become a huge problem on Clare Island, Co. Mayo.