

## HOW TO

*Grow, Cook, Dye and Wear Rhubarb with Bella Gonshorovitz*

*I didn't grow up with rhubarb. In fact, my inaugural rhubarb, part of a mixed-fruit crumble, was like nothing I'd experienced before: bold and tart and celery-like in texture and appearance, except in the most heart-rending shade of pink. I have been fascinated with rhubarb ever since. My enchantment grew when I started dyeing, for rhubarb is one of the most hardworking plants in the natural dyer's garden.*

indulge.





**GROW:** Feed your rhubarb throughout spring with organic fertiliser, keep weeds and slugs away, retain moisture by mulching around the crowns, and water religiously. Once the plant establishes, this hardy perennial will keep growing for years, even decades. Still, every five years, as the plant gets congested, you need to lift it from the ground and split the crown. This results in embryonic plants which are the best way to start growing rhubarb. Lift the crown with a spade and, using a hoe, split it into three or four pieces, ensuring each one has thick roots as well as a large bud—an eye-shaped bulge—which will become your first shoot in the new year.

Dividing the plant is critical maintenance, and you'll need to repeat this process once your new plant reaches similar maturity. Plant the crown with the bud well above ground, as it's prone to rot in the soil, and cover the roots completely. You can split the crowns in autumn or early spring. Either way, it is critical you resist the temptation to harvest in the first year.

Forced rhubarb grows in the dark and strains every sinew of its being to the light. Glucose, usually distributed between the rhubarb's large leaves and the stalks, remains in the stem allowing for an earlier harvest. During the Second World War, forced

rhubarb became a national institution in the UK, its price regulated when fruit was scarce and rationed. The cultivation method is still prevalent in the 'rhubarb triangle' of West Yorkshire. For centuries, the plants have been grown in large, dark forcing sheds and harvested in candlelight.

Rhubarb is ready for harvest in late March to April, though a mild winter could push it into May. The length of the season depends on the variety, but it is likely to crop until mid-summer. The stems will be ready to harvest from the second season when they are 1–2.5cm in width, long, crisp and firm. A common mistake is to cut the base of the stem, which can lead to crown rot. Instead, pull the stalks with both hands and, with a gentle twist, yank them from the bottom of the plant. This will promote plant health and leave you with some crown residue. Never pull more than one-third of the stalks, as a good amount of foliage is necessary for photosynthesis. Pick the stalks regularly—approximately every fortnight for younger plants, and every week for larger plants—but once the summer heat arrests growth, rendering the stems flavourless, leave it to grow wild until it naturally dies when hit by the first frost. Exhausted rhubarb tends to go to seed with the most dramatic, beady, cream flowers. As tempting as it is to keep these beauties intact, cut them back and keep them in a vase—they take vital energy from the plant. ▶



**COOK:** *Rhubarb, Tahini, and Plum crumble*

How did this condiment find its way into the humble crumble? It happened after Eyal Shani, one of my favourite Israeli chefs, made the connection. 'Even lemon is incapable of connecting to tahini as well as rhubarb does', he wrote in one of his characteristically poetic food columns, which encouraged me to try and inject this Middle Eastern staple into one of the most quintessential of English puddings. The result is a gooier crumble, with a texture that resembles a flapjack. Serve with a comforting splash of ice cream and a side of chutzpah.

*Ingredients*

250g plums, quarter and remove stones  
 450g rhubarb, cut into pieces, each about 2–3cm  
 80g golden caster sugar  
 3/4 teaspoon ground cinnamon  
 1/2 teaspoon orange blossom water  
 1/2 teaspoon ground nutmeg  
 125g cup rolled oats  
 100g ground almonds  
 60g cup raw tahini  
 zest and juice of 1/2 lime

*Method*

Preheat the oven to 180°C. Put the plums and rhubarb in a pie dish and toss them in 1 tablespoon of the sugar, 1/4 teaspoon of the cinnamon, and the orange blossom water. In a separate bowl, combine the remaining sugar and cinnamon with the nutmeg, oats, and ground almonds. Add the tahini, lime zest and juice to the dry ingredients. Using your hands, rub the wet ingredients into the dry until the mixture is well combined and resembles breadcrumbs. Layer the crumble over the fruit mixture and bake for 30–40 minutes until the top is golden and crispy. Serve with ice cream.

**DYE:** Rhubarb leaves contain high levels of oxalic acid (a corrosive that can harm kidney function and cause a number of other health issues), which renders them unsuitable for human consumption yet perfectly safe for soil microorganisms. The leaves are often used as a weed-suppressing and water-retaining mulch around the rhubarb plant, yet many find their way to the compost heap. I never think of anything that goes on the compost heap as 'waste'—it is all part of nature's inspiring circle of life. Still, discovering I can extract a natural mordant from the leaves was a breakthrough moment.



**MORDANT:** To make a rhubarb leaf mordant, you'll need at least 20g of rhubarb leaves for every 100g of fabric. Chop the leaves coarsely and place them in a large colander and rinse. Put in a deep pan and cover them with water. Bring to a boil and simmer for an hour over a low heat. Allow to cool and then strain the liquid into another large pan. Add the rhubarb leaves to your compost heap. You don't have to use the mordant straight away. You can keep it in an airtight jar in the refrigerator—it will store for up to a week in a non-sterile jar and up to 10 weeks in a sterile jar.

If I want to mordant cotton or linen using rhubarb leaf mordant, I bind the fabric in plant-based milk first to boost its pigment-absorbing capabilities and use at least a 1:2 ratio of mordant to the fabric. To mordant the fabric, wet the cloth and submerge it in the strained solution in a deep pan. Simmer for 40 minutes, allow the vat to cool, then rinse the fabric.

When mordanting silk or wool, there is no need to pre-bind the fabric before mordanting—the rhubarb leaf mordant is at its most potent when it comes into contact with animal fibre, so it doesn't require the extra boost that plant-based fibres do. You should use a 1:5–1:2 ratio of mordant to fabric.

**DYE:** Rhubarb is more than mordant—the tannins in the leaves add a yellow tint to the fibre and can be used in the vat as dyestuff. The mordanting process will leave your fibre with a yellow tinge. To build on that, increase your leaf to fabric ratio. Leaving the fabric to soak for up to 48 hours will yield a more vital shade—vivid buttery yellows on plant-based fibres and yellowish khakis on animal fibres. Add vinegar to increase the vat's acidity towards the end of the soaking period for more mustardy hues.

As valuable as the leaves are, my favourite part of the plant is the crown for colour. You can only obtain this dyestuff during the dormant period and working with the crown yields highly prized golden hues. To dye with the crown, you must split it into small pieces after harvesting. Once it dries, it can be stored in a brown bag for months, producing vivid dyes regardless of its age. The crown residue, the brown tips that appear on the very end of the stalks as you yank them, are an invaluable addition to the dye vat, too.

**Edited excerpt from *Grow, Cook, Dye, Wear* by Bella Gonshorovitz, ISBN 978 0 2415 3644 5 £20. To make the Rhubarb Bolero see [selvedge.org](http://selvedge.org)**



# The Rhubarb Bolero

As I find rhubarb such an elegant crop, I wanted to make something a bit more evening-oriented. I think this cut looks ravishing in sheer fabrics, but don't feel compelled to work with organza unless you're an experienced sewer. A good alternative is cotton organdy, which looks like a papery, matt-finished organza. This fabric was a popular apron material in the early 20th century and the bolero pieces are pretty economical, so you could cut them from a few used aprons – plus the rhubarb dye is very good at concealing stains! The Rhubarb Bolero would also be beautiful cut from light linen or cotton voile, popular bases for many textile items ripe for upcycling.

## Construction

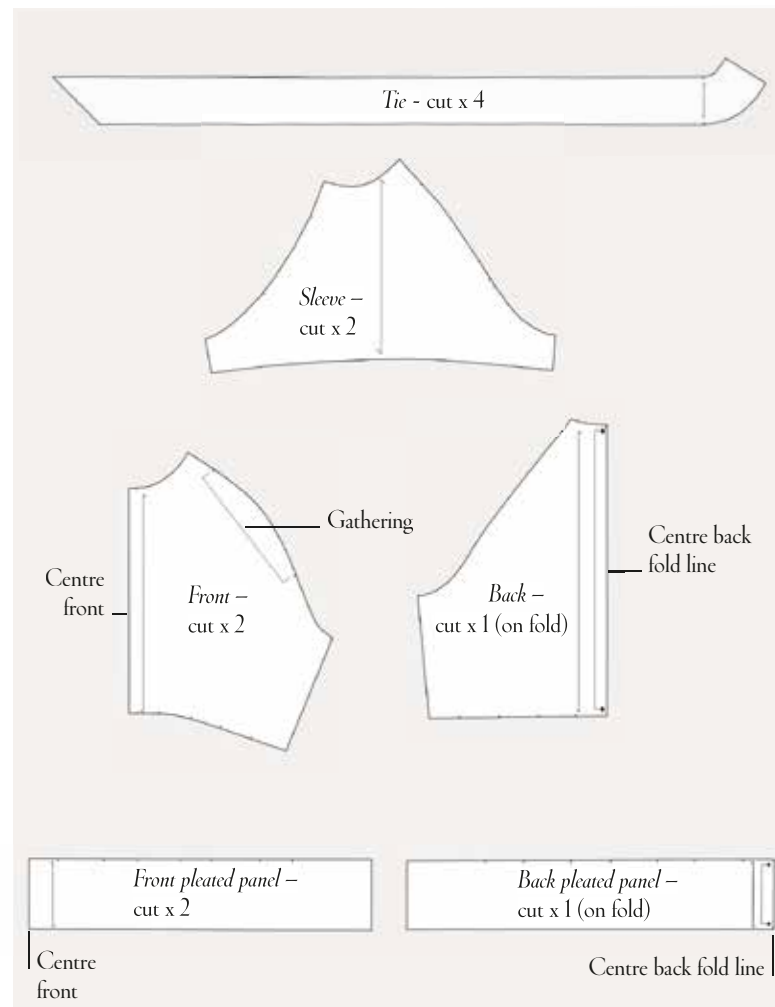
Shown on the right are the pattern pieces for the Rhubarb Bolero (please see Pattern Sheet 1):

If you are working with a sheer fabric and feels confident with your sewing, try the French seam and pin hem options. But by no means consider the overlock and roll hem a cop-out – you could make these into a bold detail by using a contrasting thread colour.

All seam allowances are 1cm (3/8in) unless otherwise stated.

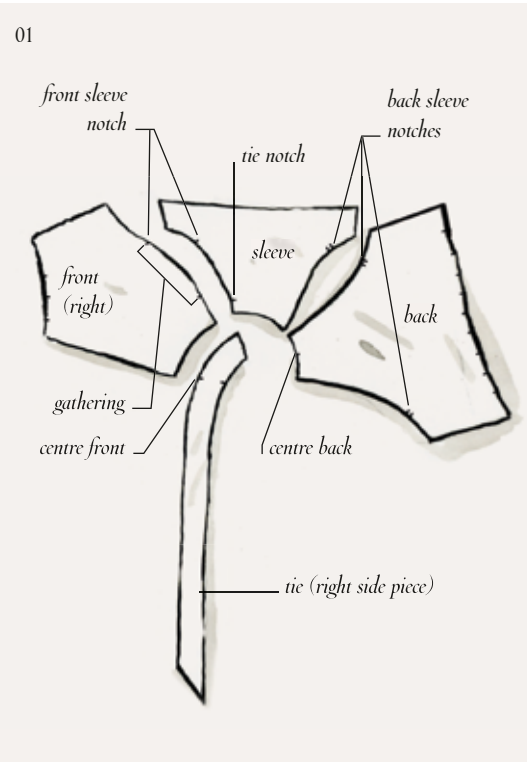
## Measurements

Please refer to the appendix on p220 for size charts and fabric requirements. The primary measurements you need to consider here are the bust and waist.



Pattern pieces





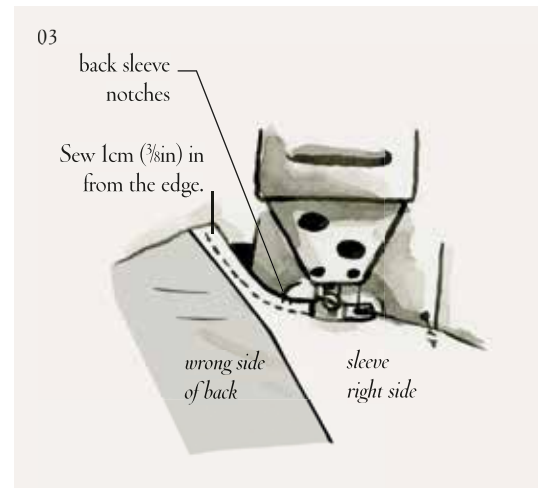
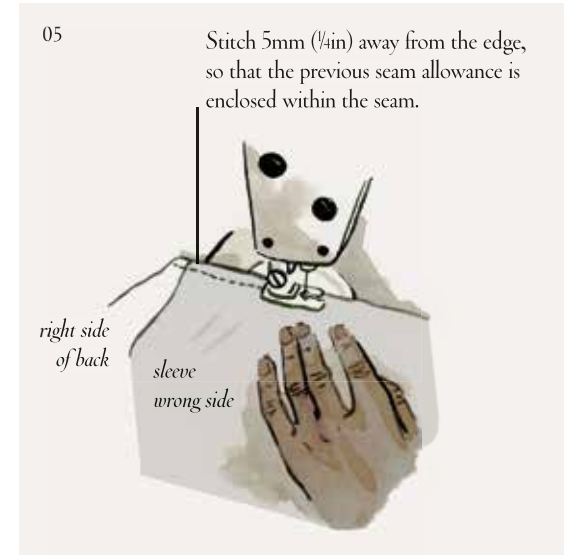
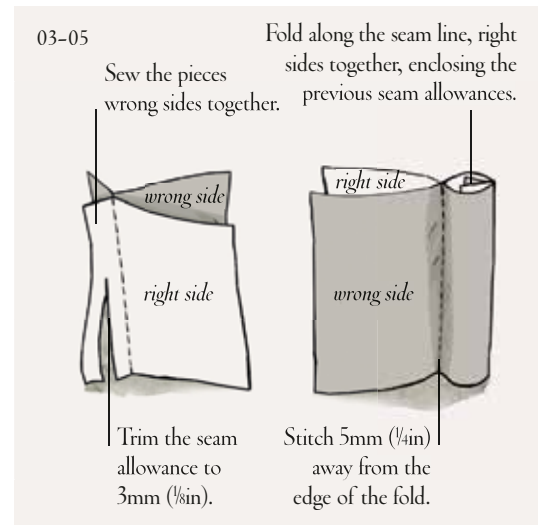
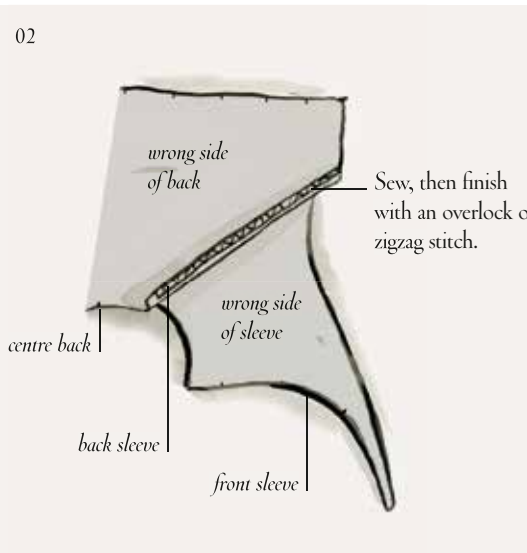
01 Familiarize yourself with the raglan sleeve construction

A raglan sleeve may look different from a traditional one, but it is more straightforward to set in. The back piece and sleeve are marked by two close notches, the front piece by a single notch at the armhole. However, the front piece also features notches that indicate the start and end of the gathering line. The front sleeve features another notch closer to the neckline, matching the tie seam on the front piece.

The simplest way to attach the sleeves is to use an overlock or zigzag stitch (see step 2). Alternatively, see steps 3-5 for instructions on using a French seam; this gives a more refined finish that is particularly good for sheer or thin fabric.

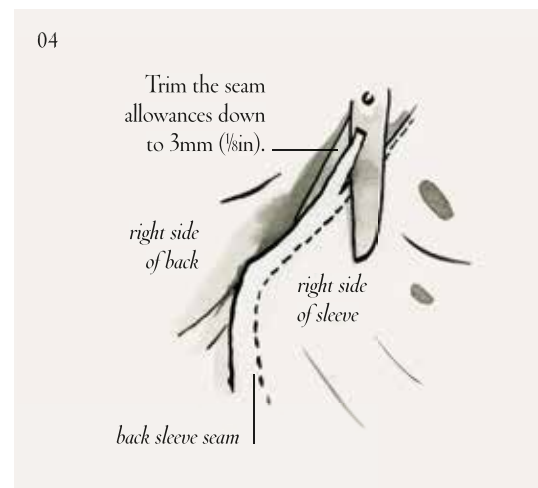
02 Attach the back piece to the back of the raglan sleeves (overlock or zigzag finish)

Pin the back and sleeve right sides together, matching the notches. Sew, then press. Finish the seam allowances together with an overlock or zigzag stitch. Repeat for the other sleeve, then continue to step 6.



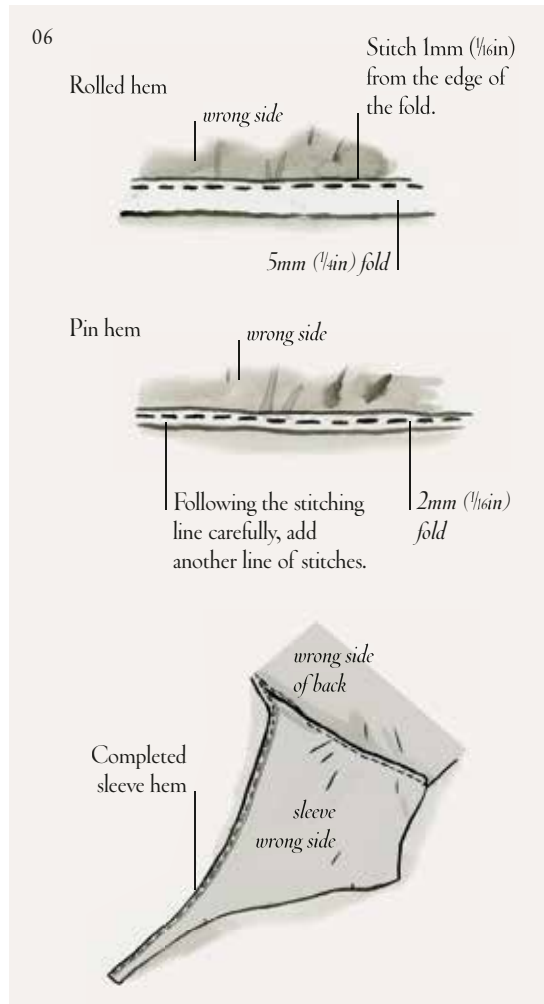
03 Attach the back piece to the back of the raglan sleeves (French seam finish)

Pin the back and sleeve wrong sides together and sew. Trim both sides of the seam allowance down to 3mm (1/8in). Open the seam with the right side facing up, so that the seam allowance is on top. Press the seam allowances towards the sleeve.



05 Fold the fabric on the seam line, right sides are together. Stitch 5mm (1/4in) away from the edge, so that the previous seam allowance is enclosed within the new seam. Press. Repeat steps 3-5 for the other sleeve.

06



06 **Stitch the sleeve hem**

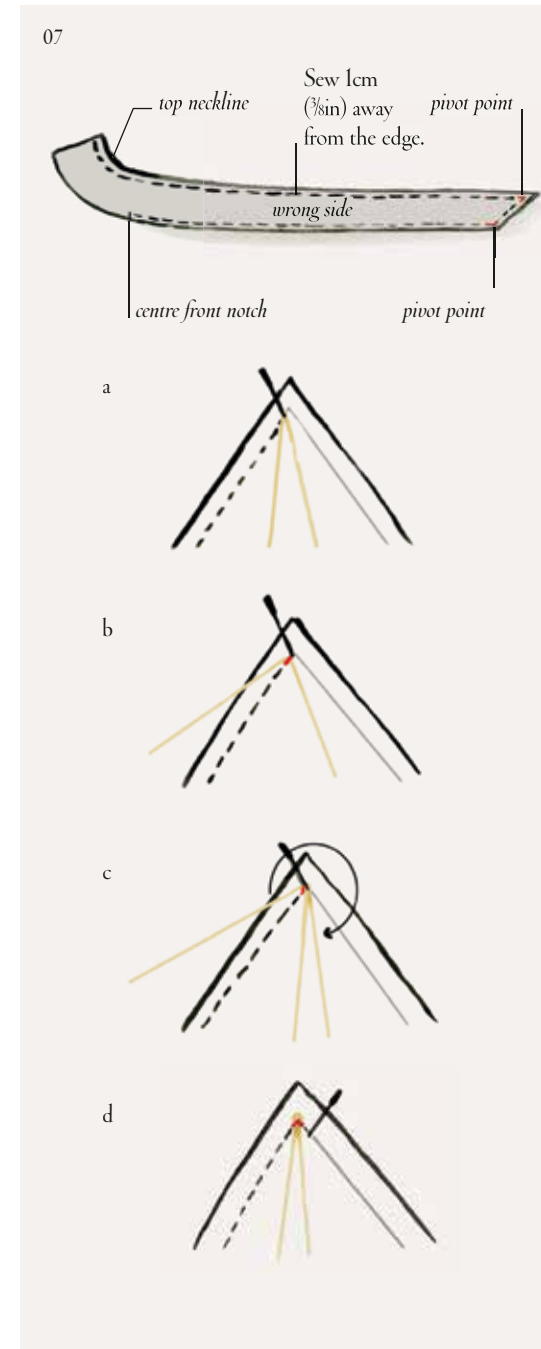
The simple option is a rolled hem:

- a) Fold the sleeve hem to the wrong side by 5mm (1/4in), press, then fold a further 5mm (1/4in) and press again.
- b) Stitch 1mm (1/16in) from the edge of the fold, using the inside edge of machine foot as a guide.
- c) Press.
- d) Repeat for the other sleeve.

For a more refined finish (for sheerer and thinner fabric), use a pin hem:

- a) Fold the sleeve hem to the wrong side by 5mm (1/4in) and press. Stitch 1mm (1/16in) away from the bottom edge.
- b) Trim the seam allowance as close as possible to the stitching line.
- c) Fold the fabric up 2mm (1/16in) above the stitching line, enclosing the raw edge, and add another line of stitches, following the first stitching line carefully.
- d) Press.
- e) Repeat for the other sleeve.

07

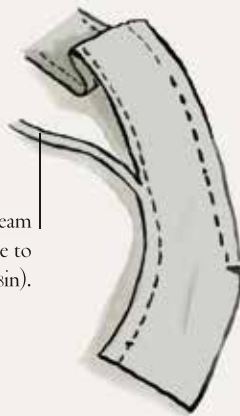


07 **Sew the ties**

Pin one pair of tie pieces right sides together, all the way up to the centre front notch. Start sewing from the top neckline. When you are one stitch away from the pivot point, keep your machine needle in the fabric, lift the presser foot and insert a length of doubled thread, wrapping it tightly against the needle (a). Lower the foot, then slowly make a single stitch over the thread (b). Leave the needle down and pull the thread on the right side over to the left, around the base of the needle, so that both lengths are pulled towards the bottom of the tie (c). Leave the needle down, and turn the tie ready to sew the next side. Pivot and sew a single stitch to “trap” the thread tail between the two stitches that make the corner (d). This hack will help you achieve a sharper corner. Repeat at the other corner and stitch all the way to the front notch seam.

08

Trim the seam allowance to 4mm (1/8in).

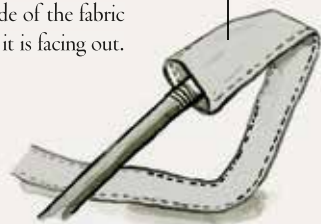


- 08 Trim the seam allowance down to 4mm (1/8in).
- 09 Using a pencil or loop turner, turn the tie right side out. Insert the pencil or loop turner into the tie, pushing it all the way down to the end seam, then pull the right side of the fabric through so it is facing out. Use the thread inserts to pull the corners out and then cut off the threads. Repeat steps 7-9 for the other tie.

09

Insert a pencil or loop turner into the tie, pushing it to the end seam, then pull the right side of the fabric through so it is facing out.

wrong side



right side

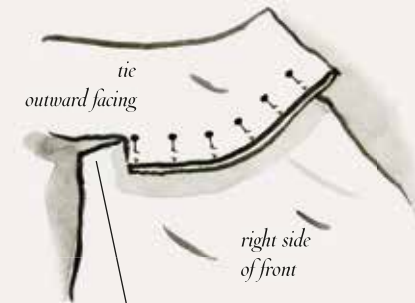


Use the thread inserts to pull the corners out.

10

tie outward facing

right side of front



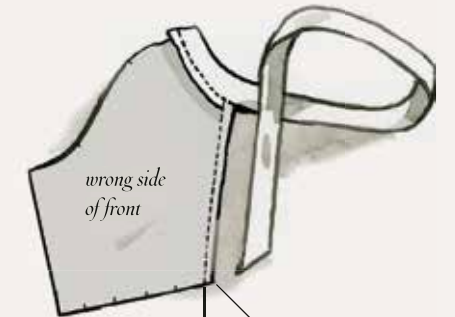
1cm (3/8in) excess fabric is left with a raw edge at the centre front.

12

wrong side of front

5mm (1/4in) double fold

Stitch 1mm (1/16in) away from the folded edge.



11

Sew 1cm (3/8in) in from the edge and trim the seam allowance down to 3mm (1/8in).

neckline seam

right side of front

tie outward facing

wrong side of front

tie (outward facing, visible from front of garment)

tie inward facing

neckline seam

wrong side of front

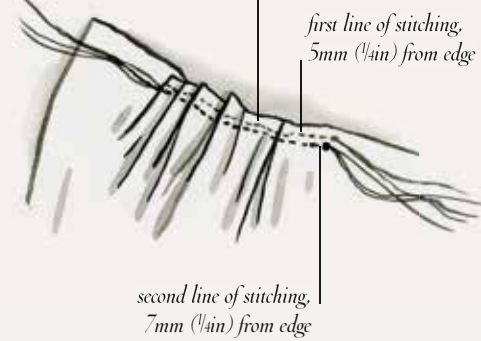
Fold the fabric over the seam so the right sides are together. Stitch 5mm (1/4in) away from the edge so the seam allowance is enclosed within the seam.

- 10 **Attach the tie to the front piece**  
Take one tie and one front piece. Matching the centre front notches, pin the longer raw edge of the tie's unstitched seam allowance to the centre front piece so the wrong side of the front and the undertie are together. There will be 1cm (3/8in) of excess fabric with a raw edge at the centre front – this will later form the front finish.
- 11 Repeat the French seam technique (see steps 3-5), taking extra care with the curve. (You could opt for an overlock or zigzag stitch here, but as this piece is close to the neckline and may be visible when the bolero is worn, it is well worth the effort that the French seam technique requires.)
- 12 **Finish the centre front**  
Fold the centre front line of the front to the wrong side by 5mm (1/4in), press, then fold again by another 5mm (1/4in) and press. Stitch 1mm (1/16in) away from the edge. Press. Repeat steps 7-12 for the other tie and front piece.



13

Gently pull the threads on both sides to create an evenly distributed gather.



**13 Gather the front raglan seams**

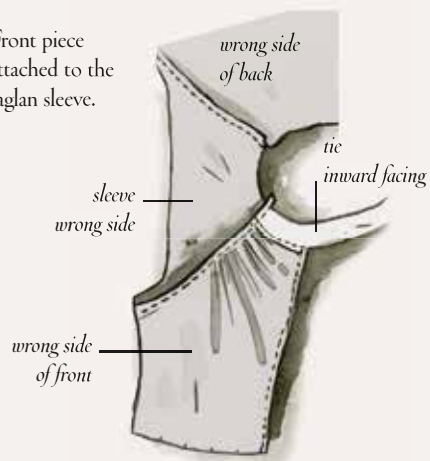
Adjust your machine stitch length to 4 and stitch two lines between the gathering notches on the front piece – the first 5mm (1/4in) from the edge, and the second 7mm (1/4in) from the edge. Don't reverse to reinforce the stitches at the beginning and end, and leave plenty of thread on each end. Gently pull the threads (only from the top or only from the bottom of each stitch line) to create an evenly distributed gathering. Match to the measurement indicated on your pattern piece. Repeat on the other front piece.

**14 Attach the front pieces to the raglan sleeves**

Pin and stitch the completed front piece to the front sleeve line. If you are finishing with an overlock or zigzag stitch, pin the pieces right sides together; if you are opting for a French seam, pin the wrong sides together and follow the instructions in steps 3–5. Repeat for the other front piece and sleeve.

14

Front piece attached to the raglan sleeve.



15



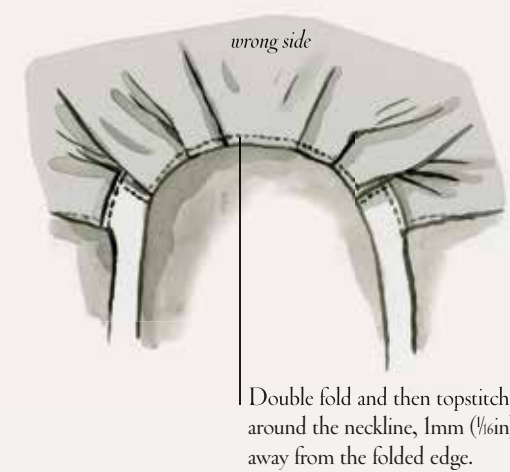
**15 Sew the side seams**

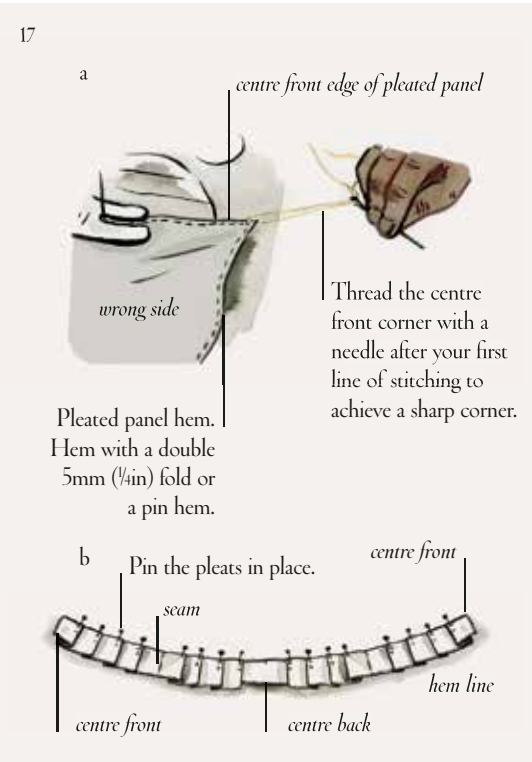
If you are finishing with an overlock or zigzag stitch, pin the front and back right sides together along the side seam and stitch; if you are opting for a French seam, pin the panels wrong sides together and follow the instructions in steps 3–5. Repeat for the other side.

**16 Finish the back of the neckline**

Cut 3mm (1/8in) long notches into the curviest part of the neckline to alleviate the tension. Fold the neckline to the wrong side by 5mm (1/4in) in and then another 5mm (1/4in), pressing with your fingers as you go along to keep the folds in place. Topstitch around the neckline 1mm (1/16in) away from the folded edge. Press.

16

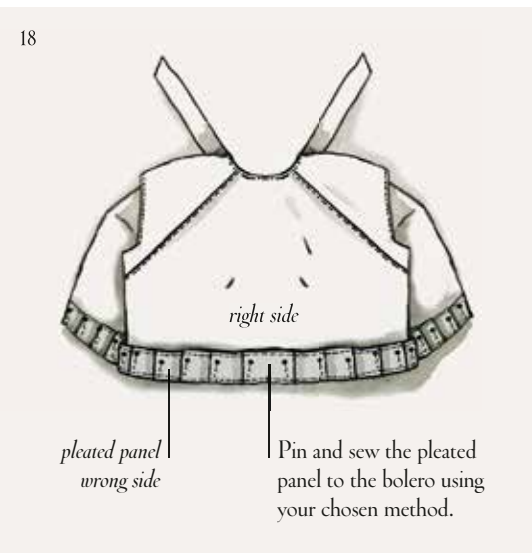




17 Sew the pleated panel

Pin one front pleated panel to each short end of the back pleated panel, making sure the centre front edge of each front panel is the one that's left loose. Sew together to form a long strip. If you are finishing with an overlock or zigzag stitch, pin the panels right sides together; if you are opting for a French seam, pin the wrong sides together and follow the instructions in steps 3-5.

Then, stitch the hem line, stitching from the top of one short side, along the long edge, and up the other short side. The most elegant finish is a pin hem (see step 6). If you opt for a pin hem, thread the centre front corner with a needle after your first line of stitching, to keep the corner sharp as you pivot (a). Alternatively, fold in 5mm (1/4in) and then another 5mm (1/4in) to the wrong side of the fabric, then topstitch 1mm (1/16in) away from the fold. Press. Pin the pleats according to the notches on the pattern (b). Tack across the pleats to hold them in place, then remove the pins.



18 Attach the pleated panel to the bolero

Pin the pleated panel to the body of the bolero, matching the notches. Stitch in place, then finish with an overlock or zigzag stitch, or use a French seam (see steps 3-5). Press all over.



## Appendix

### Rhubarb bolero

#### BODY MEASUREMENTS:

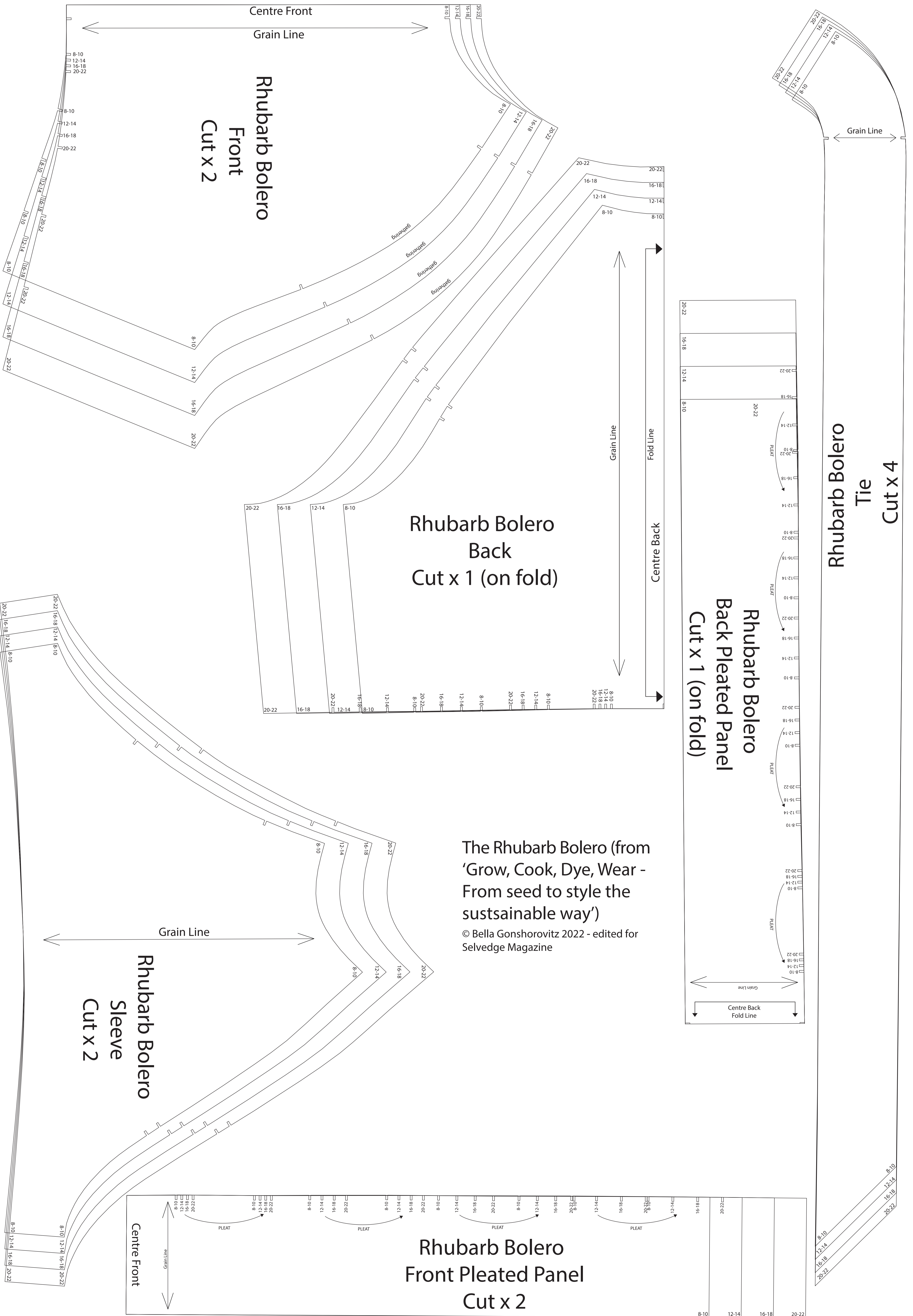
Measurement/size	8-10	12-14	16-18	20-22
Chest/bust	84-92cm/ 33-36 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub> in	92-98cm/ 36 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>4</sub> -38 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub> in	98-108cm/ 38 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub> -42 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub> in	108-116cm/ 42 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub> -45 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>4</sub> in
Waist	64-74cm/ 25-29in	74-82cm/ 29-32 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub> in	82-90cm/ 32 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub> in-35 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub> in	90-98cm/ 35 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub> in-38 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub> in

#### FINISHED GARMENT MEASUREMENTS:

Measurement/size	8-10	12-14	16-18	20-22
Chest/bust	96cm/37 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>4</sub> in	101cm/39 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>4</sub> in	105.5cm/41 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub> in	110.5cm/43 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub> in
Waist	89cm/35in	94cm/37in	98.5cm/38 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>4</sub> in	104cm/41in
Neck to sleeve hem	22.5cm/8 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>4</sub> in	24cm/9 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub> in	25.5cm/10in	27cm/10 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>4</sub> in
Sleeve opening	42.5cm/16 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>4</sub> in	45cm/17 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>4</sub> in	47.5cm/18 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>4</sub> in	49.5cm/19 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub> in
Length	38.5cm/15in	40cm/15 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>4</sub> in	41cm/16in	42.5cm/16 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>4</sub> in

#### FABRIC REQUIREMENTS:

Fabric width/size	8-10	12-14	16-18	20-22
120cm/48in	95cm/1 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>8</sub> yards	100cm/1 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>8</sub> yards	105cm/1 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>4</sub> yards	110cm/1 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>4</sub> yards
150cm/60in	75cm/ <sup>7</sup> / <sub>8</sub> yard	75cm/ <sup>7</sup> / <sub>8</sub> yard	80cm/ <sup>7</sup> / <sub>8</sub> yard	80cm/ <sup>7</sup> / <sub>8</sub> yard
170cm/66in	75cm/ <sup>7</sup> / <sub>8</sub> yard	75cm/ <sup>7</sup> / <sub>8</sub> yard	80cm/ <sup>7</sup> / <sub>8</sub> yard	80cm/ <sup>7</sup> / <sub>8</sub> yard
180cm/70in	70cm/ <sup>3</sup> / <sub>4</sub> yard	75cm/ <sup>3</sup> / <sub>4</sub> yard	75cm/ <sup>3</sup> / <sub>4</sub> yard	75cm/ <sup>3</sup> / <sub>4</sub> yard
200cm/78in	55cm/ <sup>5</sup> / <sub>8</sub> yard	60cm/ <sup>5</sup> / <sub>8</sub> yard	60cm/ <sup>5</sup> / <sub>8</sub> yard	60cm/ <sup>5</sup> / <sub>8</sub> yard



**Rhubarb Bolero  
Front  
Cut x 2**

**Rhubarb Bolero  
Back  
Cut x 1 (on fold)**

**Rhubarb Bolero  
Sleeve  
Cut x 2**

**Rhubarb Bolero  
Front Pleated Panel  
Cut x 2**

**Rhubarb Bolero  
Back Pleated Panel  
Cut x 1 (on fold)**

**Rhubarb Bolero  
Tie  
Cut x 4**

