

Beetroot

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Is this the quintessential Australian vegetable? A true blue hamburger isn't the same without it and a salad sandwich minus that characteristic red stain seems somehow unpatriotic. Although native to Mediterranean regions, when it comes to vegetables, beetroot is practically an Aussie icon!

FACT FILE

Botanical Name: *Beta vulgaris*

Family: *Chenopodiaceae*

Climatic Range: *Beetroot can be grown across a wide range of climates. It is sown as a warm season crop in most regions, but performs best during the cooler, drier months in tropical zones.*

Planting and Harvest: *Beetroot can be planted from August through until February in temperate and subtropical climates with successive plantings providing a continuous harvest from late spring through until early winter. In tropical zones plants are best established from May through until September providing a harvest from late winter until early summer.*

Tender Tubers

Beetroot are biennial plants grown as annuals and harvested for their swollen root tuber. The flesh is generally red with brown/purple skin, although yellow and white fleshed varieties are also available. While beetroot is most commonly eaten as a cold, salad vegetable pickled in vinegar, it also makes a delicious hot vegetable. Grated beetroot may also be eaten raw.



Eat Your Greens

The leaves of beetroot may be harvested for use as spinach with many varieties producing particularly tasty greens. If both a foliage and root harvest is required, be sure to avoid excessive defoliation of any one plant. Silverbeet with its deep green foliage and contrasting white stalks and Swiss chard with its colourful leaves and stems are varieties of beetroot (*Beta vulgaris cicla*), grown exclusively for their foliage harvest.

Here's to Variety

While most beetroot varieties are more or less rounded, shapes do vary somewhat. *Egyptian* is a squat, old flat variety with delicious green tops. *Early Wonder* also is more flattened on the top and bottom with rounded sides. It is also popularly harvested as spinach. Globular or oval types include the cold tolerant *Melbourne Early Slowbolt*, *Crimson Globe*, *Crimson King*, *Detroit Dark Red* and *Derwent Globe*. For quick growth try *Rapid Red* which provides a mature harvest in less than 10 weeks. Long and half-long types produce elongated roots and include *Cylindra*, *Long Dark Blood* and *Obelisk*.

For something a little different look for the *White* and *Golden* varieties available from Eden Seeds and other non-hybrid seed stockists.

Sowing the Seeds

Beetroot seeds are clustered together with each cork-like fruit containing 2-3 potential offspring. The seeds require plenty of moisture to germinate. Soaking them in warm water for an hour or two prior to planting is a great way to speed up germination. Seeds may be sown directly into prepared beds to a depth of 1-2cm or into seed trays for later transplanting as seedlings. Seeds should be well firmed to ensure good contact with the soil.

Unlike other root crops, beetroot seedlings transplant reasonably well providing they are not too large and are kept moist when transplanting. Successful transplanting can be carried out as soon

as plants have formed their first true leaves. When purchasing punnets of seedlings the clustered nature of the seeds become evident, with several seedlings obvious in each cell. Be sure to carefully separate these into individual plants prior to planting out. This will avoid seedlings competing with one another and prevent a distorted, misshapen harvest.

Where plants are sown direct it is important to thin the multiple seedlings back to one plant. If carefully removed, the thinnings can be transplanted to form additional rows. Allow 10-15cm between plants and 20 cm between rows.

Space Savers

Beetroot plants are great space savers occupying a relatively small amount of space for the harvest they provide. Their shallow root system makes them ideal for container planting and the foliage growth looks quite attractive. Providing adequate moisture levels can be maintained, they are the ideal choice for container gardens on hot, sunny balconies and verandahs.

In the vegetable garden beetroot may be planted in between slower maturing crops as they can be harvested at any stage. Where space is limited, establish plants close together and begin harvesting alternate plants when they reach golf ball size. This will leave room for the remaining plants to grow to maturity. Successive sowing at fortnightly to monthly intervals will provide continuity of harvest. Remember that sowing just 10 seeds is likely to produce 20- 30 seedlings!

Growing Your Own

Beetroot require a soil pH of 6.5-7.5, so a dressing of lime is often necessary prior to planting. Plenty of sunlight is essential as plants grow poorly in shaded situations. An adequate supply of water is also required for a tender, juicy harvest. The forking and hairiness normally associated with root crops is less apparent in beetroot. Manure can be used in preparing the soil providing it is well decomposed.

Bear in mind that excessive nitrogen results in lush disease prone foliage at the expense of root development. Like all root crops, adequate levels of phosphorous and potassium are required. Good gardening techniques including use of rock dust, compost, seaweed, green manures such as lucerne and animal manure will ensure that these and other nutrients required for good growth of beetroot are readily available.

Upwardly Mobile

Beetroot plants naturally tend to force themselves up out of the soil as the roots begin to swell, so it is not unusual to see the swollen root base half exposed above the soil. Hilling of plants is not generally required but may be useful in shallow soil to prevent plants from toppling over. Mulching crops can be beneficial in very sandy soil or to help keep soil temperatures cool in warmer growing regions. Care should be taken not to retain excessive moisture around the roots and stems of plants.

Bountiful Harvest

Beetroot can be harvested at any stage that they are considered large enough to eat, but certainly before they exceed 10cm across. Plants generally require 10 – 12 weeks to mature fully. Overly large or slowly grown crops are more likely to be tough and fibrous. Use a garden fork to gently lever the crop from the ground. In cold climates beetroot may remain in the soil providing a harvest of winter vegetables providing the soil is well drained and the crop is protected from frost.

Fresh is Best

Tinned beetroot is really a poor substitute for freshly grown, home cooked supplies. Why not treat yourself to some fresh beetroot from your local organic outlet? Look for clean, firm roots without signs of wrinkles or softening. Where foliage is attached it should be fresh and without spotting. One taste and you will be preparing a patch to plant a crop of your own, convinced that fresh is definitely best!

Seed Saving

Saving seeds of beetroot requires a little patience. Plants are biennial, producing vegetative growth in the first season and flowers and seed in the second. They also require substantial differences in day length to initiate flowering, so gardeners in warmer parts of the country may find that plants do not bloom at all. Beetroot are both wind and insect pollinated. You will need to ensure that you do not have two varieties in flower at the same time or isolate plants if you wish to keep different strains pure. Where possible, allow at least three to four plants of one variety that show good growth and disease resistance for flowering and seed production.

Problem Solved

Beetroot are largely free of pest and diseases. Most common problems are easily remedied and usually attributable to inexperience on the part of the gardener.

Holes chewed in foliage

Occasionally chewing insects, slugs and snails will attack beetroot foliage. Significant damage must result before root harvest is affected and control measures are required. Repellent molasses or chilli spray, a sprinkling of Derris dust or barriers and traps to control slugs and snails may be required in extreme cases.

All tops and no bottoms

Where beetroot grow lush foliage but fail to produce a good root harvest, an imbalance of nutrients is generally to blame. Excessive foliar applications of nitrogen or incorporation of overly rich manure when preparing beds can create an excess of nitrogen at the expense of other nutrients. Available nitrogen must be balanced with good supplies of phosphorous, potassium and other nutrients.

Spots on leaves

Fungal leaf spots and rust sometimes occur on beetroot leaves. These are worse when plants are poorly grown (lack of sun, water and nutrients) or planted at the wrong time of year. Avoid growing beetroot during most humid time of the year in tropical regions, improve air circulation, reduce nitrogen applications and avoid excessive wetting of the foliage. Apply seaweed sprays to build disease resistance and supply trace elements.

Splits and Cracks

Intermittent or inadequate watering can result in stress cracks and breakdown of roots. Incorporate organic material to improve the water holding capacity of sandy soil and mulch around plants to reduce drying out. Water plants regularly to ensure that growth is not checked by water stress.