

Swedes and Turnips

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Swedes and turnips have been dismissed as old fashioned by gardeners and cooks who favour trendy aubergines and Asian greens. But take a closer look at these much-maligned vegetables and you will find that they have a lot to offer.

They occupy very little space, are easy to grow, provide an extended harvest and can be used in anything from soups to salads. Unfortunately, they are also considered a fashion faux pas. Members of the younger generation have not eaten them and few baby boomers have ever grown them. It would seem that the culture of swedes and turnips relies on a small band of dedicated devotees.



Fact File

Botanical Name

The botanical distinction between swedes and turnips is a little unclear. Some authorities believe that turnips and swedes are varieties of the same vegetable. Historical records indicate that turnips appeared in cultivation much earlier, leading other experts to suggest that swedes (*Brassica napobrassica*) are a natural hybrid between a cabbage (*Brassica oleracea* var. *capitata*) and a turnip (*Brassica campestris* var. *rapa*)

Family: Brassicaceae

Origin: Central and southern Europe

Climatic Range: Swedes ideally suited to cool moist, frosty climates where they can be grown almost year round. In warmer regions they are best planted in autumn and harvested before summer. Turnips are better able to cope with warm conditions. They can be grown almost year round in cool, frost-free regions and may be grown in the tropics during the dry season.

Description: Swedes and turnips form a swollen root similar to a beetroot in the first growing season and produce flowers and fertile seeds in the second season in cool climates. Plants grown in subtropical and tropical regions rarely produce fertile seeds. The skin of swedes is yellow to purple and the flesh is typically yellow. Turnips have white skin and flesh, often with a purple crown. Varieties of both vegetables are also grown for their leaf harvest.

The Direct Approach

Like most root vegetables, swedes and turnips resent transplanting. Seed is best sown 1-2cm deep in well-prepared beds with rows spaced 30 - 45cm apart. Seeds germinate easily in 5-7 days. Seedlings should be thinned to 15-20cm between plants or at closer intervals if crops are to be harvested when young. Water regularly as the shallow roots dry out quickly. Mulching plants can help reduce weed competition and ensure that the soil remains moist. Water stressed crops tend to become woody. Sow seeds at regular intervals for a successive harvest.

Growing Your Own

Swedes and turnips require a moderately rich soil with a pH of between 6 and 7. Like all root crops, they will fork and develop hairy roots when grown in freshly manured soil, heavy clay or stony ground. They can be grown following a crop that has been well manured such as lettuce, but preferable not following another brassica vegetable. Lack of trace elements results in a tasteless, bitter harvest. Organic matter in the form of well-decomposed compost and old animal manure will provide good levels of trace elements, but seaweed sprays, rock dust or powdered trace elements may be required where the soil is less fertile.

Sweet Young Things

It can be argued the demise in popularity of swedes and turnips rests fairly and squarely with gardeners who leave them to mature in the garden for too long and cooks who's culinary adventures extend only to mashing them. Grow and consume these vegetables as sweet, tender babies and be prepared to experiment a little when cooking them.

Harvest your crop as soon it has matured to what you consider an acceptable size. Grown in this way swedes and turnips are great space savers that can be squeezed in between taller or slower maturing crops.

Most roots can be left to mature to the size of a beetroot without becoming woody. Leave them to grow to the size of a melon and they are likely to be fibrous and tough. Swedes and turnips keep for extended periods once harvested, but in cold climates swedes are also particularly long-keeping if left in the ground.

Salad turnips may be harvested like radishes as little as four weeks after sowing. They can even be pickled in vinegar and eaten in the same way as beetroot. Salad varieties are also commonly grated and eaten fresh.

Eat Your Greens

Swede and turnip tops can be harvested as spinach as soon as newly sown plants are large enough to sustain regular leaf removal. Light shade results in more tender foliage and reduced bitterness.

In very cold climates swedes can provide valuable spring greens at a time when a little variety is welcome. Simply leave a few swedes to mature from your crop planted in the previous autumn. Remove the old leaves when temperatures rise. Fresh, young foliage will be quickly produced as the plant draws on the stored nutrients accumulated in the root system.

Growing swedes in this way is a great option for gardeners restricted to patio and balcony gardens. While the roots of these plants become fibrous and unsuitable for consumption, they will form flower spikes in late spring and may be used as a source of seed for next season's crop.

Chomp, Chomp

Chewing insects are a major pest of all brassica crops and swedes and turnips are no exception. Fortunately a small amount of leaf damage will not affect the size and quality of your harvest. Where caterpillars, grasshoppers and beetles get out of control, try molasses sprays, Derris dust, insecticide grade diatomaceous earth, chilli or other organic sprays. Regular foliar applications of seaweed sprays will keep potential fungal disease under control and provide a valuable source of trace elements.

Playing the Field

Many varieties of swedes and turnips have been lost from cultivation due to their biennial growth habit and their promiscuity. Swedes and turnips generally require two growing seasons to produce their metre high flower stalk and successfully develop seeds. Plants are insect pollinated so physical barriers such as shade cloth covered cages are required to prevent accidental cross pollination not only between different varieties of swedes and turnips but also between them and other varieties of brassicas.

GE Threat

A further threat to these vegetables exists in the form of commercially grown Genetically Engineered brassica crops such as canola. Cross pollination between GE crops and other species of brassicas has already been recorded. All brassica species including non-hybrid, open pollinated and heirloom varieties of swedes and turnips face the threat of GE contamination.

Varieties of Swedes

Champion Purple Top - This variety is the most popular variety grown both



commercially and by home gardens. It has the ability to reach a large size without becoming woody. It has a rich flavour and warm yellow coloured flesh. (Eden Seeds, Yates)

Hunters Butter - This heirloom variety has white flesh and white skin. Plants are best spaced further apart to accommodate its broad spreading foliage. (Eden Seeds)

Laings Garden – This selection produces fast maturing, medium sized roots. Once a popular home garden variety, it is now only available through seed saving and organic growing groups. (Seed Savers Network).

Laurentian - This variety has a rose/purple coloured crown and quality roots with a great flavour. (New Gippsland Seeds)

Yellow Bronze Top This variety is adapted to warm climates and has a yellow skin and flesh with a bronze crown. (Yates)

The Seed Savers Network at Byron Bay in NSW is keen to hear from gardeners who have saved seed from swede varieties dropped from commercial seed catalogues including *Laings Garden*, *Tipperary* and *Royal Rose*. Turnips varieties such as *Scot's Yellow*, *Kashmir Red*, *Orange Jelly*, *Cowhorn* and *Red Top Viarmes* are also being sought.

Varieties of Turnips

Hakurei – This recent introduction is eaten raw or grown for its green foliage. (Yates)

Japanese - Producing long white roots like a daikon radish, this variety can be eaten raw or cooked. The tops can also be consumed as a green vegetable. (Green Harvest, Eden Seeds)

Milan White-Red Top - The rounded root of this heirloom variety is white but develops a vivid red crown where roots emerge above the soil. (Kings Seeds)

Presto – This small, pure white open pollinated turnip is best harvested when young. (New Gippsland Seeds)

Purple Top White Globe - This variety is grown primarily for its root harvest. It is long keeping and slow to bolt to seed. (Kings Seeds, Green Patch, Eden Seeds, New Gippsland Seeds)

Red Round – The roots of this variety are slightly elongated and have red skin and white flesh. The foliage has attractive red veins and red stems. (Kings Seeds)

Scarlet Queen Hybrid - This sweet, red skinned variety has a mild flavour. (New Gippsland Seeds)

Snowball - Sometimes referred to as white egg turnips, this heirloom variety produces round, white roots. (Eden seeds)

Tokyo White Cross - This hybrid has smooth white, slightly elongated roots that are eaten raw like a radish. It is also grown for its foliage harvest. (Kings Seeds, Yates, Diggers Seeds, New Gippsland Seeds)