

How to grow beets

Beets (*Beta vulgaris*)

Family: Chenopodiaceae (Goosefoot)

Hardiness: Half hardy

Ease of growing: Moderate

Nutrient needs: Medium

Water needs: High

Common propagation: Seed

Seed facts

Germination temperature: 50°F to 85°F

Germination time: 5 to 21 days

Viability: 5 years

Direct sow: mid-April to mid-July

Transplants

Weeks to grow transplants: 4 to 6

Start: March to June

Plant out: May to August

Planning facts

Typical spacing: 2" x 18"

Plants per square foot: 9 to 16

Time to harvest: 50 to 100 days from seed;
35 to 45 days from transplant

General

Beets are not one of the more popular vegetables, even though both the root and the leaves are edible. The roots are high in sugar (8 to 20 percent), and the plant is a source of vitamins A and C. You can eat beets hot or cold. You can also pickle them or use them to prepare the Russian soup borscht. Roots are red, purple, golden or white, and either round or cylindrical. Leaves are similar to their close relative Swiss chard. Beets are cool-season crops but are fairly heat tolerant. High fluctuating temperatures produce beets with poor flesh color or white rings.

Variety selection

Many interesting varieties of beets are available, varying in color, shape and time to maturity. Colors include red, golden, white or mixtures. Chioggia beets have concentric red and white rings. Some varieties, like Forono, have cylindrical shapes providing uniform slices for pickling or cooking, with little waste.

Planting and care

Beets do best on a light soil with a pH over 6.0. Beet "seeds" are actually dried fruit containing one to four true seeds. This means that thinning is often required to get to the desired spacing of about 2 inches between plants. Fertilize according to soil test results and make sure you apply at least 1 inch of water per week.

Major pests

Insects: Wireworms, cutworms, leafminers, flea beetles, aphids.

Diseases: Cercospera leaf spot, scab.

Wireworms are the most serious pest problem. Some gardeners will plant potato slices nearby as a trap-crop to draw wireworms away from the beets.

Harvesting and storage

Harvest leaves anytime they reach sufficient size. Smaller leaves are tender, though excessive early harvest of leaves will reduce root size and quality. For the best quality roots, harvest when they are 1 to 2 inches in diameter. Larger roots are sweeter but also tougher and woodier. Once you start picking, you can continue for four to six weeks, depending on the weather. A 25-foot row will yield 25 to 30 pounds (about 1 to 2 bushel).

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