

GROWING BEETROOT

Although it took me the best part of 25 years to discover it, fresh beetroot is tasty, versatile and packed with goodness. Can the can!

In looking for interesting information about beetroot, I came across a fantastic British website - Love Beetroot - (www.lovebeetroot.co.uk) with everything you could possibly want to know about beetroot. It's well worth a look (as are its sister sites Love Celery and Love Lettuce).

Amongst the gems, I discovered that beetroot is a good source of:

- Folate - great during pregnancy and as protection against high blood pressure, dementia and Alzheimer's
- Betaine - a mind relaxant and is used to treat depression
- Tryptophan - supports a sense of well being (also found in chocolate)
- Soluble fibre, carotenoids and flavonoids - help to reduce blood cholesterol and prevent it from being deposited in the arteries
- Boron - used by the body to produce sex hormones, which explains why the Romans used beetroot as an aphrodisiac.
- Potassium and magnesium - just good for you!

Beetroot's ancestors were sea beets which were first domesticated in the Mediterranean and the middle East in pre-Christian times. It was originally grown for the medicinal qualities of its leaves. The roots we favour today weren't discovered until the Middle Ages.

Site and soil

Beetroot like fertile, well drained and well worked soil and plenty of sun.

They will benefit from the addition of compost or manure, but be careful not to add too much nitrogen or you will end up with lush foliage and not much root development. They like good levels of potassium and phosphorous and prefer to follow an above-ground crop.

Planting

Best time for planting is late spring-summer for seeds and early summer for seedlings.

Plant seeds at a depth of 1-2 cm about 10 cm apart, with about 20-30 cm between rows. Keep soil moist until seedlings emerge in 10-14 days.

Seeds are actually clusters of 1-4 true seeds in a corky outer casing, so thinning is usually necessary after germination. Soaking seeds for about 2 hours in water just before planting is said to speed up germination.

Seedlings can be transplanted once they've formed their first proper leaves. Ensure seedlings are kept moist during transplanting.

Cultivating

Beetroot needs lots of water - insufficient or irregular watering will lead to cracking or forking.

They may need:- to be thin out while young, if they do and you are careful you will be able to transplant these.

Harvesting

Maturity is between 8 and 10 weeks from planting. Older roots will become tough and fibrous while smaller vegetables will be sweeter, so try to harvest before 10 cm in diameter. Use a garden fork to lift from the soil.

Problems

Beetroot is not generally bothered by pests, but the leaves can occasionally be attacked by grubs or chewing insects.



Choosing and using

There aren't too many things you can't do with beetroot. Leaves and grated fresh beetroot are colourful and flavoursome in salads.

It can be steamed, roasted, added to juice and made into puree or dips, to be enjoyed with fresh vegetable crudités or flat bread.

When purchasing, look for firm, smooth vegetables, with whiskers and stems attached and without spotty leaves. They can be kept in the crisper for 7-10 days. Leaves can be kept in the fridge for about 2 days.

Cook with the skins on and at least 5 cm of stalk, to prevent 'bleeding'. Once cooked, the skins will slip off easily.

References and further reading

- Love Beetroot (www.lovebeetroot.co.uk)
- Brisbane Organic Growers Inc (www.bogi.org.au/beetroot)
- The Farmers Market Companion (Viking Books)
- Organic vegetable gardening (Annette McFarlane)
- The Canberra Gardener (Horticultural Society of Canberra)

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