

# GROWING TURNIPS

**A quick quiz: who likes turnips? I mean, who honestly can say that a winter without turnips is a winter wasted? A survey of family and friends revealed a range of views - from barely tolerant to downright scornful.**

Why are these nutritious and versatile vegetables so underappreciated? Centuries of being fed to cattle and decades of overcooking and pureeing and can't have helped their reputation. Nor can assuming bigger is better.

Fortunately, new varieties and good gardening techniques are fuelling a turnip revival, such that this lowly vegetable is becoming as popular as other root crops.



Turnips (*Brassica campestris*) belong to the brassica family, along with broccoli, cauliflower and cabbages, and are closely related to swedes and daikons. They are easy to grow and easily recognisable, with white swollen roots, often with a purple crown.

They are one of the oldest crops in the world, found from the Mediterranean to the Pacific in ancient times and eaten by Romans and Greeks alike prior to the Christian era. Apparently Henry VIII was a fan of both the root and greens in more recent times.

Turnips have been immortalised in proverbs (“*You can't squeeze blood out of a turnip*”), in a strange verse by English poet Samuel Johnson (“*If a man who turnips cries/ Cries not when his father dies/ Tis a proof that he had rather/ Have a turnip than a father*”) and by actress Marlene Dietrich (“*I was raised almost entirely on turnips and potatoes, but I think the turnips had more to do with the effect that the potatoes*”). They are even said to be the original Halloween jack-o’lantern.

## Site and soil

Turnips tolerate poor soil, but will do better in richer soil. Soil that is well turned and composted will also reduce the likelihood of woodiness.

## Planting

Turnips are easy to grow in the right season. They can be grown in spring and summer, but prefer cool weather. A February-March planting is perfect for a winter harvest.

Direct sow in rows about 30cm apart, at a depth of about 3 times the diameter of the seed.

## Cultivating

Not much cultivation is needed. The seeds germinate in about a week and seedlings should be thinned to about 10cm apart after a fortnight.

Keep water up to the root to prevent woodiness, remembering that the leaves may not be a good indicator of dry conditions below the soil.

## Harvesting

Turnip tops can be harvested once they reach 10-15cm. As long as the growing point isn't removed, the tops will continue to grow.

Start to harvest the roots when they reach the size of a golf ball or radish. If left to tennis ball size, they will become woody and tough and will start to lose flavour. Maturity is generally reached at about 8 weeks.

Some gardeners leave the crop in the ground and harvest as needed through winter, but it is important to ensure that the roots don't become too large.

## Problems

Because they grow and are harvested so quickly, pests are not a major problem. They can be bothered by slugs, snails and aphids and pests that attack other brassicas may be attracted to the foliage.

## Choosing and using

At the markets, choose firm turnips with a fresh smell. The small young ones will generally be sweeter and more tender.

Braise, mash, bake, roast or stir-fry them, add them to soups or stews, pickle them or even eat them raw as a crudite. Don't throw away the leaves - they are nutritious and tasty as cooked greens, in stock or in salad.

## References and further reading

- The Canberra Gardener
- The Gardener's Network website  
[www.gardenersnet.com/vegetable/turnip](http://www.gardenersnet.com/vegetable/turnip)

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