

GROWING CELERY

I'm not sure if they're myths or not, but two of the best known facts about celery are 1) it takes more calories to eat a piece than the celery actually contains, and 2) it has a reputation as a finicky plant to grow.

Here are some other cool facts about celery. It was once called smallage. It is mentioned in Homer's Odyssey. It is part of the Apiaceae family, along with celeriac, parsley, parsnip, carrots and fennel. It wasn't until relatively modern times (16th century) that celery began to be grown as a vegetable rather than a medicine.

In fact, amongst the most interesting things about celery are its reported medicinal properties. The seeds, stalks and juice are rich in compounds that help relax blood vessels, which helps in reducing blood pressure. It is also a good source of potassium, vitamin C, folate and mineral salts and has been prescribed to treat anxiety, insomnia, arthritis and gout. .

Site and soil

Celery originally grew in marsh land and has never lost its love for moisture-retaining, fertile soil that is slightly alkaline. It also favours a position in an open, sunny bed and needs regular watering to prevent the stems from becoming tough and stringy.

Planting

Celery prefers moderate conditions, so it's best to avoid planting in temperature extremes. In our region, the best time to plant is thought to be either in late summer-early autumn or late winter-early spring. I grow mine in autumn because I mostly use celery in soup and stock and I think the flavour is more intense once the frosts arrive.

It's far easier to use seedlings, but if you have a lot of time, patience and water, try growing from seed. Soak seeds before sowing and press them into seed-raising mixture rather than covering them. They will take 14-21 days to germinate and will need to be kept moist. Once they produce a pair of leaves, they can be pricked out into small pots and grown for a further 6 weeks until they're ready to be planted in the garden.

Adequate spacing between plants will allow good air circulation to keep the crop healthy. Suggested spacing is 20-30cm between plants and 60-80 between rows. Many books suggest planting in grids rather than in a long row to provide protection against the wind.

Growing

To blanch or not to blanch? Blanching produces sweeter, pale stalks. If, like me, you tend to use the leaves and stalks for cooking, blanching probably isn't necessary.

To blanch, wait until the plants are a decent height (at least two months after planting), then gather the stalks in a bunch and tie loosely. Wrap each plant in thick paper, cardboard or a milk carton with the bottom cut out. Hill

surrounding soil around the plant to exclude light. Continue to water regularly. After 3-4 weeks, the stalks should be pale and ready to harvest.



Harvesting

You can either carefully lift the whole plant using a fork, or harvest single stalks and leaves from the outside as you need them. The plant should be ready to harvest about 4 months after planting.

Problems

Snails and slugs need to be kept under control, especially if blanching. Don't grow carrots and celery near each other as carrot flies will attack celery roots.

A good growing environment and regular application of liquid fertiliser is the best way to control many pests. If you notice problems, such as leaf-spotting fungi or leaf miners, remove affected leaves (or whole plants if necessary) and burn or dispose of them - don't compost them.

Choosing and using

When purchasing fresh celery, choose firm, crisp bunches with unwilted leaves. Steer clear of stalks with blemishes or cracks. Store celery in the fridge - unwashed and in a plastic bag or container - for up to a week. If your stalks are looking a bit limp, revive them by soaking them in cold water.

Celery is great as extra crunch or a main feature (a la Waldorf) in salads, in stir-fries, as a garnish, and as an integral ingredient in stock or a star attraction of soup. I harvest the seeds and use them instead of salt in stews, soups and casseroles in particular, as I've read that they're a natural flavour enhancer.

References and further reading

- Organic Vegetable Growing (Annette McFarlane)
- From A la Carte to Zucchini (Anthony Barker)
- The LoveCelery website: www.lovecelery.co.uk
- Kitchen Garden Companion (Stephanie Alexander)

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