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2018 is the Year of the Beet

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One of the best reasons to grow beets is that they are two crops in one. Tasty, nutritious beet greens can be harvested from thinnings to full sized leaves. Sweet, earthy beet roots are delicious prepared numerous ways. Because of all it has to offer, the National Garden Bureau has named 2018, the year of the beet.

Our modern culinary beets are believed to have been derived from a type of wild beet found along Mediterranean coastlines. Roots were whitish or yellowish in color and tapered like carrots. It is thought that from this ancient subspecies came chards and white beets. Over time, shades of pink, then red were selected for culminating in the classic red beets of today.

Beets are a biennial in the goosefoot (*Chenopodiaceae*). They form their tasty roots the first year and if grown in a milder climate and left to their own devices, the second year they would send up a flower stalk. To gather seeds in our climate, some beet roots would be overwintered and replanted in the spring so they would flower. Then, seeds could be collected and new crops sown.

The seeds of beets are rather curious, resembling crinkled spheres. Each sphere is a bit smaller than a pea and contains 2 to 4 seeds as they fuse together as they ripen to form these little clusters. Keep this in mind when planting beets so as not to overcrowd them.

Seeds are usually planted one-half inch deep and 3 inches apart although they can be planted closer if you plan on harvesting greens and baby beets, essentially thinning as they grow. Sow seeds about 2 to 4 weeks before the last frost is expected, typically in mid-May, for late spring or early summer harvest. Fall crops are usually planted in late August. For good sized beet roots, a sunny location is necessary. Beets planted in partial shade will produce flavorful greens but roots may not develop fully.

Some vegetable gardeners recommend soaking the seeds for several hours before planting but I have found that as long as the soil is kept moist after planting, they germinate in 5 to 10 days. Two to 4 sprouts will germinate where each seed is planted. After the little seedlings reach an inch or so in height, use scissors to snip out all but the strongest from each cluster. Use the trimmings in salads.

Beets grow best in a near neutral, fertile soil so mix in limestone, if necessary, as well as the recommended amount of organic or synthetic fertilizer before planting. Varieties that take more than 50 days to mature often benefit from a light sidedressing 6 to 8 weeks after they germinate. Also, our New England soils tend to be low in boron and beets may exhibit hard black spots if grown in deficient soils. This condition is known as black heart. Moderate additions of compost or the use of organic fertilizers usually provide plants with sufficient amounts of boron.

Water beets regularly during dry periods. They appreciate about one inch of water per week. Like all root vegetables, it is important to keep competition from weeds down. Use untreated grass clippings, mulch hay or other organic material as a mulch to both keep down weeds and keep in moisture.

Greens can be harvested at just about any time. To keep plants growing, only remove 1 to 2 leaves from each plant at one time. Baby beets are picked when they reach 1 to 1 ½ inches. Look for varieties labelled as baby beets if your goal is to grow lots of them as these tend to be smaller at maturity. Most beets will keep well in the garden so pull as needed once they mature. Any beets left after the first hard frost can be picked, their tops cut off and stored in boxes of moisten sand, peat moss or sawdust in a cool, dark area. They also will keep for 3 weeks or so in the refrigerator.

The hardest thing about growing beets is deciding which varieties to grow. Most beet roots are red but “Detroit White” and ‘Albina Vereduna’ are two white rooted cultivars. ‘Golden’ and ‘Touchstone Gold’ have yellow flesh and a sweet, mild flavor. ‘Chioggia’ is an Italian heirloom with unique red and white concentric circles.

Some classic red varieties include ‘Detroit Dark Red’, ‘Red Ace’ and ‘Early Wonder’. Like many varieties, they mature in about 50 days. For savory maroon-colored beet greens along with tasty beets, try ‘Bull’s Blood’. I am partial to ‘Cylindra’ as the roots are 8 inches long and oval-shaped, meaning less to peel for a meal. They are also quite flavorful. For winter storage, choose ‘Lutz Winter Keeper’ or ‘Always Tender’.

Compared to some vegetables, beets do not have many insect or disease problems. Beet miners may feed on leaves but just tear out infected spots. Probably a bigger challenge is to keep rabbits and woodchucks from finding the leaves just as delectable as we do.

For questions about growing beets or on other gardening topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.