

Consumers May Begin To Dig Root Crops On the Dinner Plate

UNIVERSITY PARK (Centre Co.)—The special tastes of turnips, rutabagas, parsnips and beets—called “root crops” by farmers—may be making a comeback on the nation’s dinner menu, says a vegetable specialist in Penn State’s College of Agricultural Sciences.

“Baby boomers’ parents and grandparents ate a lot of root crops, but after World War II these vegetables fell by the wayside because they were seen as ‘poor man’s’ food,” says Pete Ferretti, professor of vegetable crops. “During the Great Depression, people ate these items because they could grow them cheaply, and they could be stored for long periods in root cellars or outside. They often took more work to prepare.”

Ferretti says restaurant chefs and gourmet cooks are starting to use root vegetables in recipes again. “They can be used in soups, stews and casseroles,” he says. “Cooks need only a small amount of these crops to give recipes a distinctive flavor.”

Ferretti says home gardeners can easily grow root crops—which include carrots and radishes—although Pennsylvania soil conditions can hamper some varieties.

“Many root crops suffer in our typically clay soil, particularly carrots and parsnips,” he says. “They have to struggle to grow in heavy soil, and that produces a smaller root that often is rough and distorted.”

All root crops are grown from seed, so gardeners need not worry about transplanting young plants.

•**Carrots.** Ferretti recommends growing two types. Nantes or Danvers, starting April 1. “Nantes carrot varieties are thick, shaped like a torpedo and have a blunt end, which pushes through clay-laden soils,” Ferretti says. “Danvers varieties are wedge-shaped. Other types and varieties can split or produce a misshapen carrot.”

•**Radishes.** Gardeners should plant radishes in the same row as carrots, according to Ferretti. The faster-growing radishes will loosen and break through the crust of the soil to allow better

growth for the slower-growing carrots. They can be planted by April 1 and then again during the last two weeks of August. He recommends placing seeds about an inch apart when planting.

Radishes come in many varieties, including white, black and various shades of red. Ferretti recommends the Champion, Sparkler and Improved Red Prince varieties for best results in Pennsylvania.

•**Beets.** This sturdy vegetable probably is affected least by Pennsylvania’s heavy soils and can be planted in early April. “Almost all the varieties are round or torpedo-shaped,” Ferretti says. “They should be planted about 1 to 3 inches apart to give them room to grow.”

Beets require high levels of boron, so gardeners should mix 4 teaspoons of laundry borax powder into a gallon of water. “Don’t use more than that,” Ferretti warns. “Boron can be toxic to beets as well as most other plants when present in excessive levels.”

Two top red varieties are Ruby Queen and Red Ace. Red Ace has darker, more even color and is very sweet and tender. Ferretti also recommends Burpee Golden Beet, a yellow variety, which some cooks prefer because it lacks the red juice that stains hands, utensils and other food items.

•**Parsnips.** A cool-season vegetable, parsnips can be planted in late April and left in the ground until late fall or even over the winter. Like carrots, they are slow to germinate, so make sure the soil is deeply spaded and does not form a crust. “Ethylene gas gives carrots and parsnips a bitter taste,” Ferretti says. “Never store them with apples, pears, tomatoes or other ethylene-producing fruits.”

Parsnips should be planted and then thinned so plants are about 4 inches apart. To prepare parsnips, cooks must peel the outer layer and remove the core. Ferretti recommends quartering the parsnip and then lifting the core out. The All-America variety is recommended.

•**Turnips.** Turnips attain

their best quality when grown under cool temperatures. They usually reach edible size in about 60 days. Most turnip varieties are mature when they reach about 2 inches in diameter. Suitable varieties include Just Right and Purple Top White Globe.

“You can plant these in early April and again in late July,” Ferretti says.

•**Rutabagas.** Rutabagas need about 90 days to mature and should be planted around July 1. These vegetables have a quarter-inch-thick outer skin. The outer skin can be chopped off with a heavy knife, and the

remainder is peeled until the tender yellow flesh begins to appear. Varieties include Macomber and American Purple Top.

Diseases

Carrots, beets and parsnips all can be affected by leafspot diseases. Turnips are affected by clubroot, which causes the root to distort or swell. Carrots and parsnips are susceptible to root knot nematodes, which cause small swellings in the crop and plant roots.

Insect Pests

Flea beetles, leafhoppers and green peach aphids all target plant leaves or plant parts.

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