

POTATOES

Hugely versatile, potatoes can be roasted, mashed, chipped or baked - and are a real summer treat when freshly dug and lightly boiled with mint. There are three main types - first earlies, second earlies and maincrops depending on when they are planted and harvested; grow all three types to enjoy potatoes all summer, and store maincrops over winter.

GROWING: To help potatoes produce sturdy shoots and a heavier crop, chit seed tubers (especially earlies) before planting. Stand seed potatoes 'rose end' (with the most eyes) up in egg boxes or on a tray in a light, frost-free place in late January/February. Plant when shoots reach 2.5cm.



Choose a sunny site away from frost pockets as frost can damage the foliage. Cover shoots with soil or fleece for protection and to keep light away (light turns the developing potatoes green and green potatoes are poisonous). Plant seed tubers around late March for first earlies (late February under fleece or in pots under glass), early/mid-April for second earlies and mid/late April for maincrops. Various methods can be used:

• **Trench method:** Dig a narrow trench 12.5cm deep, lined with compost or grass clippings for a better crop. Space seed tubers at 30cm intervals in rows 60cm apart for earlies and 37.5cm intervals in rows 75cm apart for maincrops. Slugs can be a problem so you may wish to use a deterrent. When stems are about 23cm high, carefully draw soil up and over the stems to produce a flat-topped ridge about 15cm high. Called 'earthing up', this protects stems from late frosts and encourages tuber growth.

• **Polythene method:** Tubers planted through black polythene crop just below the soil surface with no need for earthing up or deep digging.



• **Container method:** Plant seed tubers in a large container with the bottom 15cm lined with potting compost. As new stems grow, keep adding compost until the pot is full. Water crops well in dry weather, especially when in flower and the tubers are forming. A fortnightly liquid feed of a balanced general fertiliser can increase yields.

Lift first earlies in June/July and second earlies in July/August. Wait for the flowers to open or the buds to drop and the tubers are ready to harvest when they are the size of hens' eggs. Harvest maincrops from late August through October. With potatoes for storage, wait until the foliage turns yellow, cut it and remove it, then leave crops for 10 days before harvesting the tubers. Let them dry for a few hours before storing.

• Try all-purpose potato 'Yukon Golds' (yellow skin and buttery flavour), russets 'Red Norland' and 'Red Pontiac' (good for baking, frying or mashing); or unusual varieties such as 'Blue Congo' (purple skin and blue flesh) or 'Pink Fir Apple' (salad potato with bright pink skin).



WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- Vegetable seeds
- Pots/seed trays
- Fork & spade
- Hoe
- Compost/organic matter
- Plastic/fleece
- Mulch
- Watering can with rose
- General and/or controlled-release fertiliser
- Liquid feed

For more information:
www.rhs.org.uk/advice
www.plantforlife.info

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THE EASY GUIDE TO

GROWING ROOT VEGETABLES



INTRODUCTION TO ROOT CROPS

Sweet, nutritious and excellent in soups and stews, root vegetables are key players in the autumn garden and the winter table. Root crops are easier to grow than you might think, and with our simple planting tips, you'll be harvesting your own beetroot, carrots, parsnips, potatoes, radishes, swedes and turnips in no time!

PREPARATION

Root vegetables are cool-weather crops so should be grown to mature in spring or autumn.

SOIL PREPARATION: Prepare clay soils in autumn and light, sandy soils in spring. Dig over the soil to a depth of 35-45cm and incorporate bulky organic matter - well-rotted manure, compost, leafmould, composted bark or mushroom compost - to improve the soil. In light soils it offers something to hold the moisture and nutrients; in clay soils it helps break up the large particles so the soil doesn't crack, drains better and is easier to work. Remove deep-rooted and perennial weeds and any stones - which can lead to forking. Choose short- or round-rooted varieties for heavy soils.

SOWING: Sow root crops where they are to grow as most don't transplant well. Root crops usually need a deep, moist soil, but carrots and parsnips prefer light, sandy soil.

MAINTAINING: Root crops need careful watering - too much and they produce more leaves than root; too little and the roots may dry up and split after the next watering or turn woody. In dry weather, soak the plant base early or late in the day. Yields will be reduced if weeds interfere with their growth. Hoe regularly with a good sharp Dutch hoe and pull out by hand any weed seeds growing among the rows of vegetables or container-grown crops. A covering of mulch will help keep weed growth to a minimum, conserve soil moisture and insulate plant roots from extremes of cold and heat.



BEETROOT

Easy to grow, beetroot can be boiled or steamed fresh when young and tender and then peeled, or pickled.

GROWING: Sow every two weeks from mid-April to July for a succession of tender, tasty roots; those sown from June onwards can be stored over winter. Sow two seeds at 10cm intervals, 2.5cm deep in rows 30cm apart. When the seedlings are about 2.5cm high, thin out to one seedling per 10cm station. These can be replanted elsewhere as beetroot seedlings will transplant. Early sowings will be ready in June/July. Lift alternative plants once they reach golf ball size as a tasty treat; leave the rest to reach maturity - when they are cricket ball size.

• Try early, bolt-resistant 'Bikores' and 'Boltardy'; 'Detroit Dark Red' (fine winter keeper); tubular 'Cylindra' (good for slicing or pickling); orange 'Burpee's Golden'; or 'Chioggia' (sweet red-and-white-striped 'bull's-eye').

CARROTS

Regularly sow suitable varieties for a constant supply of fresh carrots. Although best when freshly picked, they can also be stored and frozen.

GROWING: Sow early cultivars in February under cloches or fleece, and outdoors from April to early July. Sow thinly, 1cm deep in rows 15cm apart, then thin to 5-7.5cm apart if required. Be careful not to bruise the skin when thinning as the smell attracts carrot rootfly. Cover the carrot tops with soil or straw to stop the roots getting 'green shoulder'. Crops should be ready about 8 weeks from sowing - dust off the soil and if the carrot top is bigger than a 5p piece, pull it up by hand or lift with a fork.

• Try super-long 'Japanese Imperial Long' (up to 60cm) and 'Danvers Half-Long' (20cm); short-rooted 'Short 'N Sweet' (10cm) and 'Thumbelina' (1.25cm) are best for rocky soils or a short growing season.

RADISHES

Easy and quick to grow, radishes like soil rich in organic matter - but too much nitrogen gives abundant leaf growth at the expense of roots.

GROWING: Sow summer radishes in spring when the soil is workable at 10-day intervals until temperatures reach 18°C. Plant 1cm deep, 2.5cm apart, with 15cm between rows. Thin to 5cm apart and water well. Sow winter radishes in July and thin to 15cm. Frost improves flavour, but radishes picked in cool weather are milder than summer-harvested crops.

• Try round 'Cherry Belle' (good in poor soil); oblong 'French Breakfast' (red with white tips); carrot-shaped winter radishes 'White Icicle' (white) and 'China Rose' (rose-coloured); 'Easter Egg' (small red, white, rose and violet mix); 'Round Black Spanish' (dark maroon skin and white flesh); and turnip-sized 'Watermelon' (pale green skin and pinky red interior).



PARSNIPS

Parsnips are prized for their hardiness and flavour, especially when roasted or added to stews. The roots take a long time to germinate but can then stay in the soil until ready to use. You can grow radishes in the same planting hole and harvest them before the parsnip needs the space.

GROWING: Sow parsnips under cloches or fleece in February, but March-early May sowings fare much better. Sow three seeds per station at 15cm intervals, 13mm deep, in rows 30cm apart. Thin crops to one seedling per station when they reach 2.5cm. Lift roots carefully with a fork once the foliage dies down in autumn. Place straw over the tops to help prevent the soil from freezing around roots you are saving for later.

SWEDES

Peel swedes (or neeps) before adding to soups or stews, or boiling and mashing like potatoes. Yellow or white, usually with purple tops, these hardy root crops measure 10-15cm in diameter.

GROWING: Swedes grow best in an average soil as too much organic matter or nitrogen can cause malformed roots. Direct sow seeds in May or June in a moist seedbed, 1cm deep, 5cm apart with 50cm between rows. Thin to 15-25cm, depending on the size of the variety. Keep well watered in hot, dry weather and harvest plants in autumn.

• Try 'American Purple Top' or 'Thomson Laurentian' (both purple and yellow roots); and white 'Gilfeather' (good winter keeper).

TURNIPS

Easy to grow, tasty and nutritious, turnips can be steamed, boiled, mashed or roasted and their leaves cooked like any other greens. Most turnips are purple above the soil and white below, but they can also be yellow or white. Peel older turnips before cooking.

GROWING: Sow the earliest turnips in February and March under cover or April outdoors. Sow seeds 6-12mm deep, 2.5cm apart, in rows 46cm apart. Thin seedlings to leave 10-15cm between plants and harvest when the roots reach 7cm in diameter - about 4-6 weeks depending on variety. Try 'Purple Top White Globe', 'Seven Top' (abundant greens), 'Gold Ball' (yellow roots), quick-maturing 'Tokyo Cross' and white 'Snowball'.