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CLIPPINGS

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The Garden Beet

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Spring has sprung and many gardeners are busy getting their gardens planted with cool-season vegetables. Along with the peas, potatoes, leafy greens and radishes, I always plant a big crop of beets.

Beets – it seems people either love them or hate them. For many years, I was in the latter group. As far back as I can remember my mom planted beets in her garden. She likes them pickled and that’s how I knew beets growing up. Not being partial to pickled beets, I avoided them for years. Then one summer, a friend of mine served steamed beetroots taken fresh from the garden. I ate a few and, as it turns out, they are delicious.

Beets date back to ancient civilizations in the Mediterranean. It’s thought that early on people used only the beet greens – both as a culinary herb and medicinally. The Romans were the first to cultivate the root for food starting in the 3rd century AD. Beets grown then had long tubular roots, but today they come in many different shapes and colors.

Most people are familiar with the red, globe-shaped beet. Popular varieties include the Ruby Queen, Red Ace, and my favorites the Detroit Dark Red and Bull’s Blood. Bull’s Blood is an heirloom variety that also sports a burgundy colored top. Another well-liked beet is the Cylindra. This is a Danish heirloom variety that has a dark red, cylindrical root. For a fun colored beet try the Chioggia. This is an Italian heirloom that has red and white concentric rings on the inside – nicknamed the candy cane beet.

Beets are easy to grow. Sow the seeds directly in the ground as soon as the soil can be worked. You can plant beets any time from spring to midsummer, or make successive plantings every 2-3 weeks for a continued harvest.

Beets perform best in rich, loose, well-drained soils. If your soil is poorly drained, add compost or other organic matter. You can also plant them in containers or in a raised bed. Besides good soil, beets need space to grow. So, when seedlings reach 3-4 inches high, thin the crop. After thinning, the spacing of plants should be about 2-4 inches apart. If you are like me, it hurts a little to pull healthy seedlings from the ground but remember you can enjoy the fresh, young greens in a salad. Overcrowding is one of the most common problems resulting in a poor crop.

Interestingly, with most beet cultivars, each 'seed' is really a fruit containing a cluster of several seeds. Even if you are very meticulous about spacing your seeds when planting, you may still end up with seedlings that are too close together and need to be thinned. Poor growth can also occur due to soil that is too dry and crusted over. Keep your planted rows adequately watered especially during hot, dry periods. Mulching may help as well.

Store beets unwashed in a plastic bag with an inch of stem and the tap root still on. They will last about a week in the refrigerator. There are many different ways to enjoy beets. You can steam, boil, roast or grill them. Cook them with the skins intact, which helps preserve the nutrients then peel before eating. And don't forget to take advantage of the wholesome beet greens. Put them in a salad or sauté them in a touch of olive oil.

So, if you've been suffering from "beet-avoidance" all these years, maybe it's time to give them another try.

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