

Beets

Beets, like carrots, turnips, and Swiss chard, are biennial, meaning they flower and set seed their second year of growth (sometimes, though, they bolt prematurely, especially during hot, dry spells). Beets are also very cold-hardy. “I get my seeds in the ground about 4 weeks before our last expected frost in the spring,” says Coulter. “Then I sow more seeds every 2 weeks, to keep a steady supply of fresh, tender beets.” Stop planting when the temperatures hit 75 degrees but then begin sowing seeds again about 8 weeks before the first expected fall frost for a delicious late-season harvest. Coulter gardens in Georgia, but her planting schedule works in cooler climates, too.

Though beet seeds can be started indoors under lights, it’s far simpler to sow them directly in the garden. “Beet seeds can be tricky to germinate because of a hard seed covering,” Jett says. “Soak the seeds in warm water for a few hours before sowing them to increase the chances of germination.”

Beets grow best in full sun and well-drained soil. “Plant them in garden soil that’s been worked to a depth of 8 to 10 inches and cleared of rocks,” Coulter says. “Use lots of good organic material to amend your soil.”

Sow beet seeds to a depth of 1/2 to 1 inch and space rows 12 to 18 inches apart. Thin the seedlings to leave 2 to 4 inches of space between plants, using the wider spacing if the beets will be harvested at their fully mature size. It’s important to note that most beet seeds are multigerm (though a handful of monogerm varieties do exist), meaning there is not just a single embryo in each seed but rather a cluster of several. This results in multiple plants emerging from each planted seed, making thinning compulsory. Jett also reminds gardeners that keeping the soil moist throughout the growing season results in roots of better quality. A layer of organic mulch helps retain soil moisture, stabilize temperature, and suppress weeds.

Beets require an ample amount of phosphorus to produce large, healthy roots. Since this nutrient is not very mobile within the soil, it is most often applied as a sidedressing by distributing it along the length of the rows. Soil pH also affects the availability of phosphorus; the mineral is most accessible to plant roots when the pH is between 6.0 and 7.0, which is the favored pH range for beets. If a soil test notes a lack of phosphorus, an early-season, side-dress application of bonemeal or rock phosphate should fill in the gap.

A few insect pests occasionally bother beets. To protect beet foliage from leaf miners, flea beetles, leafhoppers, and other potential troublemakers, cover the newly planted rows with floating row cover and leave it in place until harvest.

Harvesting Beets

Beet greens can be picked and used as baby greens in salad mixes when they are just an inch or two high. Older greens are best served steamed or sautéed. Roots can be harvested when they reach an inch in diameter, but they remain tender until they measure 3 or 4 inches. “I think the roots and leaves taste better, and are more tender, if they are harvested when they are on the smaller side,” says Coulter. “I don’t let even the big varieties grow as large as the seed packet indicates.”

Before storing unwashed, harvested roots in a plastic bag in the fridge, cut off the tops, but leave an inch or two of the stems intact to keep them from bleeding. Beets should last about a week stored this way. “Long-term beet storage should take place in layers of damp sawdust or sand in a cold (around 32°F), moist (85 to 90 percent humidity) place,” says Coulter. “A root cellar is ideal.” Beet greens, on the other hand, don’t store well and should be used within a few days of picking.

Beets contain more sugar than starch. Roasting, grilling, and other simple cooking techniques bring out their sweet flavors.