

BEETS



Beet roots can be harvested at 1 inch in diameter, as babies, or left until they swell to 3 to 4 inches. Either way they are colorful and deliciously hearty. Leaves are edible also, and best cut when they are young and tender, at 4 to 6 inches. Begin planting beets about a month before the last frost of the season, and sow repeatedly through the spring, and again in late summer, for a long-lasting harvest. Thinning early is critical to having a good harvest of shapely mature roots.

1. Prepare. Loosen soil to a depth of about 12 inches using a shovel or tiller. Mix in some compost or slow-release fertilizer to provide plants with nutrients. Then rake the soil smooth, removing any large clumps and rocks.

2. Plant. Beets are fairly heat tolerant, but quality can suffer if the roots develop during very hot weather. Sow seeds in full sun about an inch apart, and ½ inch deep. Seedlings often germinate in clusters, so thin with scissors when the plants are very small, leaving a single plant in each cluster.

3. Grow. Water soil to keep it moist, and pull weeds that sprout nearby. When seedlings are about 2 inches tall, thin so that young plants stand about 2 inches apart. Feed growing beet plants with a good well-balanced fertilizer several times during their growing season, and as they begin to mature, harvest baby roots, leaving remaining plants spaced about 4 inches apart. A thin layer of straw mulch will help control weeds and conserve soil moisture.

4. Enjoy. Scrub beets well, then cook them whole without peeling. Leave an inch of the tops on to keep them from bleeding their color. Steam, boil or wrap with foil and bake in a 400-degree oven until tender (30 to 40 minutes) for the most mouthwatering sweet flavor.



AT A GLANCE



Exposure: Full sun

Planting time: 4 weeks before the final frost, and throughout the spring. Sow again in late summer.

Planting depth: 1/2 inch deep

Spacing in row: Sow 1 inch apart; thin to 2 inches apart, and again a couple of weeks later to 3-4 inches apart

Time to harvest : 45 to 60 days, depending on variety.