



Celery

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Take a straw poll in search of celery lovers. Do you detect a distinct lack of enthusiasm? While fresh, crisp bunches look deliciously inviting, most limp, shop soiled examples fail to inspire. Celery may not be the easiest vegetable to grow, but when it comes to flavour and freshness, a homegrown harvest is hard to beat.

FACT FILE

Botanical Name: *Apium graveolens* var. *dulce*

Family: *Apiaceae*

Origin: *Europe and Asia*

Description: *Celery is a biennial plant, but it is generally harvested while it is still young and tender, well before it flowers and produces seed. Blanching encourages the production of elongated stems that can reach up to 100cm in height. Both the tall semi-circular, ribbed leaf stalks and compound leaves that form at the stem ends are edible.*

Soil Type and Climatic Range: *Celery will grow in most well drained soil. In cool climates an almost year round supply can be achieved by planting during late winter and early spring and then again in late summer and early autumn. In frost free, subtropical climates celery is best grown during the cooler months of the year. In these regions, autumn, winter and early spring plantings are most productive. Some success can be had in tropical climates with dry season plantings.*

Seed or Seedlings?

Celery seed has a relatively short viability and should not be stored over successive seasons. Seed can also be slow to germinate. Soaking seed in warm water prior to sowing can help speed germination. Seed may be sown directly into prepared beds or into seed trays for later transplanting. Celery seedlings are available from most nursery outlets during the appropriate planting season.

Avoid planting too deeply as stems of young seedlings are prone to rot. One option is to plant seeds and seedlings into a shallow trench that can be gradually filled the trench in to support and blanch plants as they mature.



Preparing to Plant

Growing celery requires copious quantities of water. Plants are shallow rooted and tend to become water and nutrient stressed very quickly. A soil pH of 6-6.5 is preferred. It must be well drained with high levels of organic matter. Mulching can help, but care must be taken so as not to allow it to accumulate around the base of plants as stem rot may occur. Fungal leaf and stem rot disease of celery and pest problems such as slugs and snails are primarily a factor of poor drainage and air circulation, unsuitable climate or unseasonal weather conditions.

Varieties

When it comes to celery varieties your options are fairly limited. Many heirloom selections have been lost from cultivation due to declining popularity and limited seed life. Organically certified seed stocks of traditional green celery selections including *Tall Utah*, *Tendercrisp* and *Green Crunch* are available though non-hybrid seed retailers including Eden Seeds/Select Organics, Green Harvest and Kings Seeds.

So Sixties

For baby boomers, mention of celery is likely to conjure up memories of decorative celery curls made by cutting stem ends and soaking them in iced water. Cut stem lengths filled with manufactured cheese spread and sprinkled with paprika were regular sixties party fair. Celery soup made from sieved celery puree, onion and milk was filling, but lacked culinary inspiration.



Related Plants and Substitutes

Related plants include celeriac or the turnip rooted celery (*Apium graveolens rapaceum*). This vegetable has made something of a comeback of late and is commonly featured on cooking and lifestyle programs. Celeriac is grown for its swollen root harvest that is used raw in salads, eaten as a cooked vegetable or used to make soup. Plants grow best in cool climates.

Chinese celery (*Apium graveolens*) is a quick maturing and strong flavoured selection. Stems are thinner and shorter than traditional celery varieties, but plants show wide climatic tolerance.

The perennial Peruvian parsnip (*Arracacia xanthorrhiza*) is often grown for its celery flavoured stems and foliage rather than its parsnip-like root harvest.



Celery stemmed taro (*Colocasia esculenta*) is a warm climate vegetable grown for its leaf and stem harvest. Used in cooked dishes, the flavour is regarded as being mildly reminiscent of celery.

Better to Blanch

The deeper the colour, the more intense the flavour your celery is likely to have. For cooked dishes deep green colouring can be an advantage, but for salads and juicing, most people prefer blanched celery. Blanching excludes light from the stems and results in the development of pale stalks and a more tender, subtle flavoured harvest. Blanched stems should have light excluded for 3-4 weeks. Liquid fertilizer and regular deep watering are generally required during this time. Water and nutrient stress causes plants to be tough and stringy.

Blanching can be achieved by:

- planting celery at close intervals (20 – 25cm) to enhance upright growth through natural shading. Allow 60cm between rows.
- gathering the stalks together with strips of cloth to encourage more upright growth.
- growing celery in the shade of taller vegetables like sweet corn
- erecting temporary shadecloth screens flanking the sides of rows or growing celery beneath shadecloth tunnels.
- placing sleeves of wrapped newspaper, cut sections of recycled downpipe, cut off waxed milk cartons, plastic milk bottles or plastic pots around plant stem to exclude light.
- growing celery in a trench and hilling soil around plants as they mature.

Progressive Harvest

Commercially grown celery is sold as whole or half bunches. Homegrown celery can be harvested progressively by cutting only the number of stems required for immediate use.

A Stalk a Day Keeps the Dentist at Bay

Celery is said to aid a plethora of health problems – everything from headaches to heart problems. It is cited as a nerve tonic, immune booster and blood pressure reducer. Celery seeds are said to reduce the joint swelling and pain associated with arthritis. While an apple a day may keep the doctor away, chewing celery after meals is said to help to dislodge food particles from the teeth and gums and help neutralize food acids that cause tooth decay.

Seed Saving

Gardeners in cool climates can selectively harvest individual stems and while still maintaining plants for long term seed production. Seed saving is rarely successful in warm climates as plants fall victim to fungal diseases and stem rot over the wet season so that they rarely reach flowering maturity. Avoid saving seed from plants that bolt to seed in the first season, as this characteristic



is likely to be inherited in any offspring. Different varieties of celery will cross-pollinate with one another and also with celeriac and Chinese celery if flowering occurs at the same time.

Did You Know?

Ground celery seeds can be used as a substitute for salt. Juiced celery stalks can be used to enhance the flavour of other vegetable juices due to their naturally high sodium content. Celery has a long history as a medicinal plant. Low in calories and high in fibre, it is often cited as a key ingredient in weight loss programs.