

Parsnip

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As a child I hated parsnips. In what I assume was part and parcel of her Scottish upbringing, my mother boiled parsnips, carrots and potatoes together and made them into a combination mash. In my mind this simply ruined two perfectly good vegetables with something that tasted vile.



It was much later in life that I came to appreciate the delicious, sweet flavour that resulted from roasting these humble white roots. Upmarket restaurants now treat parsnips with great reverence. After generations of being regarded as a working class vegetable, it signals an ironic return to favour for a vegetable grown in royal palace gardens and aristocratic households during the 14th century.

Fresh parsnips are typically available for purchase in all but the hottest months. Commercially grown parsnips can be stored at 95% relative humidity for months prior to sale. Home gardeners can leave their parsnips in the ground, harvesting them at their peak over an extended period throughout winter. While other vegetables struggle when it is cold and damp, gardening folklore suggests that exposure to frost is prerequisite for deliciously sweet roots. Harvesting tender, home grown parsnips is a winter treat for dedicated growers.

Quick Fact File

Botanical Name:	<i>Pastinaca sativa</i>
Family:	Apiaceae
Origin:	Mediterranean
Climatic Range:	Parsnips are best suited to cold and cool temperate regions. They require a long growing season and can be planted from spring through until early autumn. Crops can be grown in subtropical areas during winter, but are prone to rotting during hot, wet summers. They are unsuitable for tropical climates.
Culture:	Deep, well drained, moderately rich soil and a long growing season are required for successful culture.

Great soil, great parsnips

Growing great parsnips is easy if you have great soil – the sort that can be easily dug to a full spade and more, is well drained, friable and contains plenty of compost. This enables parsnips to develop long, tender undistorted roots. A soil pH of 6.5-7 is preferred. Parsnips and carrots are closely related and have similar cultural requirements. If you have had good success with growing carrots, you are probably ready to graduate to parsnips.

Not for the novice

Compacted soil and stones impede the growth of tap roots and no dig gardens are typically too shallow for successful parsnip production. They are also unsuitable for growing in pots. Using fresh animal manure or excess fertiliser will result in roots that are distorted and hairy. Stress caused by uneven watering patterns will result in tough, fibrous roots, longitudinal splitting and lack of flavour. Excess nitrogen can cause top growth at the expense of root formation. Add this to the fact that the seed is hard to germinate and you soon begin to realize that this is not a vegetable for the novice grower.

Source your seed

You are unlikely to be able to buy punnets of parsnip seedlings at your local nursery. In fact, in some places, seed stocks may even be hard to obtain. Parsnips seeds are slow to germinate, have a short viability and demand from home gardeners is low. Add a poor transplant success rate to this equation and you soon understand why growing your own plants from seed is the only

available option. Seeds germinate best at temperatures between 7 and 24 degrees Celsius. If you live where it is cold, prepare garden beds now for your next sowing in spring. If you live where the winters are mild, sow seed now.

Sow fresh

Source fresh seed stocks from a nursery with rapid turnover and a good seed range or try local seed saving networks for proven, locally adapted varieties. Soak seeds in water overnight, then sow directly into garden beds where they will grow to maturity. Plant groups of 3-4 seeds at 10-15cm intervals pressing them firmly into the soil and covering with 1-2cm of sieved compost or friable garden soil. Germination occurs in 10-28 days. At this point carefully pull out all but the strongest seedling in each cluster.

Feed and weed

Keep crops growing strongly with regular watering and applications of liquid seaweed, compost tea liquid fish and/or liquid manure during the first few months of growth. Control competing weeds by hand removal and applying mulch once parsnip seedlings are well established.

Varieties

Due to their status as a relatively small commercial crop, few new hybrid varieties of parsnips have been developed. Most available types remain open pollinated and different selections vary primarily in the size and shape of the harvest and their climatic tolerance. Hollow Crown is widely grown and appears well adapted across a variety of climates. Yatesnip No 1 and Melbourne Whiteskin also remain popular commercially, particularly in Western Australia. Guernsey is favoured by many home gardeners, while White Gold is also carried by some seed companies. Other less widely available heirloom types worth exploring through seed saver networks include Large Jersey, Student, Freshman, Cobham and Oxheart.

Low Pest Presence

Parsnips are relatively free of pest and disease problems. While some fungal leaf diseases do occur these are typically associated with plantings undertaken at the wrong time of year. Cut worms can attack newly germinated seedlings. Placing cylinders made from cut down drink bottles around young seedlings provides a simple protective barrier against attack until plants grow beyond the vulnerable stage.

Promiscuous parsnips

To save parsnip seed, select several strong growing plants and allow them to grow on to flowering and maturity. You should not expect to obtain a root harvest from plants that produce seed. Much of the plant's energy will have been drained and the root will be woody and tasteless. Parsnips are widely promiscuous, cross pollinating with other parsnip varieties and related weed species. To maintain pure strains, plant so as to ensure that different varieties flower at different times, place shade cloth or fly wire cages over flowering plants to exclude pollinating insects and give mother nature a helping hand by transferring pollen from one plant to another by hand.