



Campaign for School Gardening



Crop Sheet: Carrots

Description

Latin name: *Daucus carota* subsp. *sativa*

Daucus = from the ancient Greek for carrot, *carota* = variant of the Greek word 'karoton' meaning red rooted, *sativa* = cultivated.

The carrot is an edible, fleshy root with fine, feathery leaves. There are various shapes, sizes and colours: narrow and pointed, round, cylindrical, yellow, red, white, purple and of course, orange.

The carrot is a member of the parsley family. Relatives include parsnips, fennel and dill.

Carrots are a biennial vegetable, which means that if they are left in the ground for a second year they will produce white flower heads. When these flowers are pollinated they produce lots of carrot seed.

Wild carrots have white roots, which are fibrous and inedible.



History

It is believed that the cultivated carrot originated over 3000 years ago in Afghanistan, Asia and initially had branched, purple roots.

Carrot cultivation spread westwards and northwards over many centuries; to North Africa and Spain by the twelfth, Italy in the thirteenth, Germany and the Netherlands in the fourteenth and the British Isles by the fifteenth century.

Up until the sixteenth century all carrots grown were purple or yellow. There was a preference for the yellow carrots, as they did not release the dark pigment (anthocyanin) into cooking. The modern day orange carrot dates from the seventeenth century when they were developed by selection by the Dutch.

In seventeenth century England it was fashionable for ladies to trim their hats with carrot leaves.

Interesting Facts About Carrots

Carrots can be eaten raw, cooked (boiled, baked, roasted, steamed, stir fried) or processed into juice or soups. They can be used in sweet recipes such as carrot cake.

Carrots are the best plant source of beta-carotene (provitamin A). This vitamin is beneficial for eyes and vision. During the world wars they were given to pilots to help them see in the dark, although the amounts consumed would not make a significant difference to night vision and the story was a cover to divert enemy attention from the use of radar.

Carrots are also a favourite food for fictional rabbits, including Bugs Bunny and Peter Rabbit.

(Sources: 'RHS Fruit & Vegetable Gardening' by Michael Pollock; 'Whole Foods Companion' by Dianne Onstad; 'Food Plants of the World' by Ben-Erik van Wyk, 'The New Oxford Book of Food Plants' by J.C. Vaughan & C.A. Geissler and 'Cabbages & Kings: the origins of fruit & vegetables' by Jonathon Roberts)

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How to grow Carrots

Growing conditions

Carrots grow best in a light, freely drained soil. To improve your crop, dig in plenty of compost or well-rotted manure in the previous season. Thoroughly rake the soil to produce a fine tilth (very fine, crumbly soil).

When to grow

Early cultivars can be sown as soon as February or March under cloches or fleece. The main sowing season is from April to early July

How to grow

By regular sowing of suitable types you can have fresh, frozen or stored carrots all year round. As with most vegetables, they are at their best when freshly picked.



Sow the small seeds 1cm deep, in rows 15cm - 30cm apart (spacing depends on type grown so check your packets). Sow thinly to avoid thinning out, or thin to 5 - 7cm apart. To help with sowing carrot seeds mix them with a small amount of sand and sprinkle them into the drill (row).

The odour that arises from thinning carrots can attract the carrot fly. To avoid an attack by this pest erect a barrier made from posts and clear plastic, fleece or enviromesh 60cm high around your carrot bed. Planting carrots amongst strong-smelling vegetables such as onions and garlic is said to confuse the carrot fly and keep them at bay.

Carrots seldom need watering but in severe droughts a good soak might be helpful. Small 'baby' type cultivars are suitable for growing in containers.

Harvesting

Harvest carrots as soon as they are large enough to use. Carefully use a fork if the soil is heavy. If you have a large carrot crop, these can be lifted in late autumn and stored in a box of slightly damp sand so that you can have carrots to use through the winter. But for the best flavour and texture store them in the soil with a thick covering of straw or cardboard to keep out frosts.



Pest and Disease Problems

Carrot fly is the main pest that may attack your crop. Try the methods set out above to minimise attack and grow a variety that offers some resistance, such as 'Flyaway'. Root aphids and slugs can also occasionally damage the roots. Disease problems are unusual but can include leaf diseases and violet root rot. (Refer to RHS website gardening advice for examples of pests and diseases).

Varieties to try: 'Autumn King', 'Kingston' F1 AGM, 'Flyaway', 'Parmex' AGM (small round roots), 'Purple Dragon', 'Purple Haze', 'Yellowstone'. Find other RHS recommended carrots here:
www.rhs.org.uk/plants/documents/AGMveg2005.pdf

(Sources: RHS Fruit & Vegetable Gardening by Michael Pollock & RHS Website 'Grow Your Own Veg' www.rhs.org.uk/vegetables/crops/index.asp)