

Home Gardening Series

# Beets

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## Environment

**Light** – sunny  
**Soil** – well-drained  
**Fertility** – medium  
**pH** – 6.0 to 7.0  
**Temperature** – cool-warm  
**Moisture** – moist

## Culture

**Planting** – direct seed, spring or fall  
**Spacing** – 1-2 x 18 inches, thin  
**Hardiness** – cool season hardy  
**Fertilizer** – heavy feeder, requires boron



consumption but are grown for stock feed.

## Beets – *Beta vulgaris*

Beets are derived from the wild plants of the sea coasts of the Mediterranean region and adjacent



Europe. Also known as garden beets or red beets, beets are a popular garden vegetable throughout Arkansas. Beet tops are a good source of vitamin A, and the roots are a good source of vitamin C. The tops are cooked or served fresh as greens, while the root may be pickled for salads or cooked whole, sliced or diced. Beet juice is a basic ingredient of Russian borscht (a Russian vegetable soup). Garden beet is closely related to Swiss chard, sugar beets and mangels. Mangels (also known as stock beets) are considered too coarse for human

## Cultural Practices

### Planting Time

Beets are frost-hardy and can be planted in the garden 30 days before the frost-free date for your area. Although beets grow well during warm weather, establishing the seedlings under cool, moist conditions is easier. To get a continuous supply of fresh, tender, young beets, plant at three- to four-week intervals into July. Irrigation assures germination and establishment of the later plantings.

### Spacing and Depth of Planting

The beet “seed” is a cluster of seeds in a dried fruit. Several seedlings grow from each seed. Plant seed approximately 1/2 inch deep and 1 to 2 inches apart. Allow 12 to 18 inches between rows. Poor stands are often the result of planting too deep or

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## Cultivars

| Variety          | Days to Maturity | Seed/100 Ft of Row | Disease Resistance or Tolerance | Remarks   |
|------------------|------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------|---|
| Ruby Queen       | 54               | 2 oz               | DM (R)                          | Round beet, deep red color, good quality and yield.   |
| Detroit Dark Red | 68               | 2 oz               |                                 | Deep red, good yield and quality.   |
| Red Ace          | 53               | 2 oz               | CLS, PM, DM, DR, RZ (T)         | Globe-shaped, smooth red interior. 14-inch tops green with red tinge. Sweet honey flavor. Bolting tolerant.     |
| Bull's Blood     | 58               | 2 oz               |                                 | Dual-purpose beet. Leaves great for salad; root good at baby and full size. Dark red foliage, red-striped root. |
| Golden Beet      | 50               | 2 oz               |                                 | Dual-purpose beet. Golden beet that doesn't bleed. Tops taste like spinach.                                     |
| Cylindra         | 60               | 2 oz               |                                 | Unique long root (2" x 8") that is excellent for slicing.   |
| Golden Detroit   | 55               | 2 oz               |                                 | Large, round orange roots that do not bleed when cooked.  |

Abbreviations: **CLS**: Cercospora Leaf Spot; **DM**: Downy Mildew; **DR**: Dry Rot; **PM**: Powdery Mildew; **RZ**: Rhizoctonia (**R**): Resistant; (**T**): Tolerant

the crusting of heavy soil after a rain. The seedlings may emerge over a long period, making a stand of different sizes and ages of seedlings. Hand thinning is usually necessary. Thin the seedlings to 2 to 3 inches apart. If thinning is delayed until the plants are 3 inches high, those removed may be cooked as greens similar to spinach. Some cooks leave the small roots (usually about the size of a marble) attached to the greens.

## Care

Frequent shallow cultivation is important because beets compete poorly with weeds. Hand weeding and early, frequent and shallow cultivation are the most effective methods of controlling weeds in the row because beets are extremely shallow rooted. Deep cultivation after the weeds are large damages the beet roots. Like most root crops, beets need a fertile soil (especially high in potassium) for vigorous growth. Keep your beet plants well supplied with moisture.

## Harvesting

Beets can be harvested whenever they grow to the desired size. Beets need about 60 days to reach 1 1/2 inches in diameter. This size is often used for cooking, pickling or canning as whole beets. Beets enlarge rapidly to 3 inches with adequate moisture and space. They may be stored in a polyethylene bag in a refrigerator for several weeks or in a root cellar if dug before the ground freezes in the fall. Cut the tops off the beets 1 inch above the root. Beets store best at 32 degrees F and 95 percent humidity.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### Q. What causes the beets in my garden to develop tops but not roots?

- A. The most frequent cause for beet plants failing to develop roots is overcrowding due to improper thinning.

### Q. What causes my beets to have internal black spots and many bottom leaves to die?

- A. Beets are a relatively high feeder of the element boron. Applying one tablespoon of household borax dissolved in a 12-quart pail of water along 100 feet of row alleviates this condition. If the soil is acidic, lime it according to a soil test. Too much boron can be toxic to subsequent crops.

### Q. Is it practical to grow sugar beets to make sugar at home?

- A. No. Special equipment for juice extraction and great amounts of energy for evaporation are required to make beet sugar.

### Q. What causes beet roots to fail to enlarge and often become woody?

- A. High temperatures, low moisture and slow growth caused by low fertility produce low-quality beet roots. To have enlarged and high-quality beet roots, they must mature under ideal temperatures, moderate fertility levels and have adequate moisture.

### Q. Are beet tops good to eat?

- A. Yes. Beet tops are prepared like other types of greens, such as collards or turnips, and have a distinctive flavor.

**Q. I am canning beets and have some roots with poor color. What caused this?**

A. Cooler temperatures (50 to 60 degrees F) produce darker-colored beets than warmer temperatures (70 degrees F and warmer). Generally, fall- and winter-grown beets are darker than those grown in spring. Smaller roots usually have better color than larger roots.

**Q. Every time I plant beet seeds, more than one plant comes up from each seed. Is this normal or am I doing something wrong?**

A. Table beet seeds are really clusters of single-seeded fruits grown together into a seedball or multiple

fruit. It is common for several seedlings to come up from each seed planted. After your plants start coming up, thin to 1 inch between plants to allow for normal root development.

**Q. My beet leaves are perforated by small holes. These holes at first are purple and then fall out giving the leaves a shothole effect.**

A. This condition is caused by *Cercospora*, an airborne fungus which becomes a problem under wet, moist conditions. It can be controlled with maneb sprays; however, this fungus does not cause any serious loss in beet size or development.

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