



The Subsistence Gardener

# BEETROOT

## & the Novice Gardener

### The Novice Gardener

If you have grown up in a town or city – as most people in Europe and America have done – then, through no fault of your own, it is unlikely that you will have any direct experience of growing vegetables, or other crops. If you were lucky enough to have had a garden when growing up, it is more likely that it would have consisted of a lawn, ornamental shrubs, and flower beds, than of a productive vegetable garden. Furthermore, if you have sought advice about how to grow edible crops, you will probably have been directed towards the world of commerce, and will have found yourself buying fertilisers, plastic sheeting, slug pellets, F1 seeds, seed trays, potting compost, and hothouse-grown plants. You may then have decided that it is easier, and cheaper, to simply carry on buying food from the shops.

However, just because you have not grown up growing food does not mean that you cannot become a successful gardener. In fact, by acknowledging your lack of experience, you will already have taken the most important step: it takes humility to be a gardener, and the best gardeners never consider themselves to be experts, and are always ready to learn from each other, and, most importantly, directly from nature.

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### Why Beetroot?

A good piece of gardening advice that I was once given was to start small, with crops that are easy to grow. Beetroot is one such crop. It appears to have been grown in western Europe at least since Roman times, but it also has a long history of being grown in northern and eastern Europe. In many ways, it has the resilience of a wild plant: it is closely related to beets that grow around the European coast, and does not appear to have been over-tampered with by plant

breeders over the centuries. It does not have any serious pests or diseases, and grows well in most soils, and can give a crop even when weather conditions are not ideal.

### Planting

Nowadays, it is possible to buy beetroot plants, and the robust nature of beetroot means that these plants usually do quite well when planted out, but for a substantial crop, and the satisfaction of working from basic principles, it makes sense to grow from seed. This requires a more thorough preparation of the ground, but it is well worth the effort. If you had a potato patch last year, beetroot makes a good follow-on crop: weeds can be removed, the patch hoed and raked, and planting begun straight away. If you are breaking in new ground, then it is important to take more time: hoe the ground, leave it for a few weeks; when weeds start to re-grow, hoe it again, and then repeat the process. You should have the soil in a suitable condition for sowing by June, but even if it takes until July, you should still get a crop.

Choose an old variety, so that you can start saving seed next year, and follow the sowing instructions on the packet. An advantage of beetroot is that its seedlings are easy to identify (being purple), simplifying the task of hand weeding. The seedlings should be thinned, and once the beetroots start to form, alternate plants can be picked to give baby beets. The beetroots will continue to develop until late autumn: they are quite hardy, but cannot withstand very hard frosts, so should be lifted in early winter, and stored in a clamp, where they will keep in near-perfect condition until the following spring. A few of them can be planted back in the garden for seed, allowing you to become completely self-sufficient in one key crop.

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### Leaf Beet

Leaf beet is a close relative of beetroot, but it is grown for its leaves, rather than for its root. It is sometimes known as perpetual spinach, because you can keep picking the leaves, without harming the plant. In many ways it is similar to chard, but it is not so demanding on the soil, and grows well in a variety of conditions. Generally, the central rib of the leaves is not used.

Leaf beet can be planted now, and will yield a crop almost continuously from early summer until spring next year; the plants are hardy and drought-resistant, and will thrive on most types of soil. Like beetroot, it does not have any serious insect pests, and is not attractive to pigeons. The reason that it is not better-known may be because the leaves are best used straight away, making the crop difficult to commercialise. Also, it has not been possible to mechanise the picking of the individual leaves.

There is generally a period of dormancy in the winter, but the plants start to regrow vigorously at this time of year, providing greens when you need them most. They flower in the second year; a few can be left for seed (taking care to keep them apart from flowering beetroot or chard plants).

