Growing Beets in the Alaska Garden

HGA-00041

Beets are a wonderful crop for the Alaska garden because they are well adapted to our cool climate and they are easy to grow. You can enjoy the young greens in salads, and the larger greens steamed along with baby beets throughout the summer. Stored beets last well into winter.

Cultivating Beets

Preferred Soil Conditions: Beets prefer a well-drained, rich, sandy or loamy soil with a pH between 6.5 and 6.8. They perform best with lower levels of nitrogen (1.7 pounds per 1,000 square feet) and moderate levels of phosphorus and potassium. If the greens are preferred over the storage beet, the nitrogen levels can be raised to 2.3 pounds per 1,000 square feet.

Soil Preparation: Beets prosper in deep, loose soil. Stones and clumps cause the beets to grow distorted. Raised beds will give deep soil conditions as well as improved drainage. Incorporate any needed soil amendments such as lime, ½–1 inch of compost, if available, and fertilizer material just before planting. The surface soil should be fairly smooth to provide better seed-to-soil contact for optimum germination.

Direct Seeding: Beet seeds will germinate once the soil temperature exceeds 41°F. For direct seeding into the garden, follow the instructions on the seed package. If these aren't available, use the following generalized beet instructions: Once a smooth seedbed has been established, make a thin groove in the soil ½ inch deep. Drop the seed in the groove and space about 1 inch apart. The groove can often be closed with a light watering, otherwise use a gentle raking. The beet seed should

only be ½ to ¾ inch under the surface of the soil. Rows of beets should be spaced 12 to 18 inches apart. Consider smaller, successive plantings every two weeks for a consistent supply throughout the summer rather than a single overwhelming harvest. Plant the golden beets closer together and plan to thin later since they have a lower germination rate.

Transplanting: Beets lend themselves very well to transplanting. They can be started indoors before the last frost to get a jump start on the season and to reduce the time to harvest by two to three weeks. Although beet seed will germinate in soil as cold as 41°F, it takes about 40 days. Raising the soil temperature to 70° to 80°F can shorten the germination time to only five to six days, so you may wish to consider transplanting even the later beet plantings. Transplants have a high survival rate so plant at the desired final spacing.

Watering: Beets thrive with consistent watering. Early season watering is important for rapid germination and producing an even stand. Watering throughout the growing season is important since drought stress causes the beets to become stringy

or woody. As with most garden vegetables, a target of 1 inch of water per week works well. A rain gauge in the garden can give a good indication of when irrigation is necessary. In rainy regions raised beds may facilitate drainage of excess water to avoid waterlogging.

Thinning: Most beet "seed" is actually a structure holding multiple actual seeds. Not all of the planted seed will germinate, so beets are planted thicker than they are grown and will need to be thinned. Beets should be thinned according to the seed package, but, in general, the smaller varieties such as Bull's Blood and the cylindrical types are thinned to a 2-inch spacing, while the table beet varieties should be thinned to a 3-inch spacing. The larger storage beets should have 4-inch spacing. Thin the beets when their tops are between 1½ and 3 inches. As with all crops, the thinning should take place before the plants compete with their neighbors. It is best to cut the thinnings rather than pull them out, which can damage the roots of the remaining beets. Young beet tops make an excellent salad green. Collect the thinned beets to eat. Bull's Blood is more often grown for its striking dark red leaves than for its table beet.

Harvesting: A spading fork does an excellent job of harvesting the beet. Rather than digging, the objective is to place the fork under the beet and gently lift the beet to the surface. Try to not damage the skin. Beets with undamaged skins store better. Remove the beet greens by cutting the stems about 1 inch above the beet. Leaves are removed because the greens draw moisture from the root. Beet greens are best harvested for salad by cutting the stems just above the soil line. Harvest the greens at a cooler time of day, and keep the greens cool and moist to retain quality.

Storage

Beet Greens: Remove any damaged and yellowed leaves. Rinse the greens; place in a perforated plastic bag in the refrigerator for no more than two days.

Beets: Wash, place the beets in plastic to retain moisture, and store for up to two weeks in the refrigerator.

For longer storage, the root cellar works well. Place the unwashed beet in moist sand or sawdust and store near 32°F. Alternatively, beets may be cooked and stored frozen, canned or pickled.

Varieties of Beets

Beets come in a variety of colors, shapes and sizes. Some varieties such as Bull's Blood are grown primarily for the beet greens, but most are for the beet itself. Some varieties are best for fresh table stock, while others are bred to be good winter keepers. Many gardeners consider the yellow beets to be milder than the dark red beets.

Yields: Eight varieties of novel and conventional beets were seeded mid-season into raised beds on the Matanuska Experiment Farm in Palmer. They were thinned to 3-inch spacing and were harvested in early September. The plots were two 4-foot rows that were 12 inches apart on a single bed.

Beet yield (in pounds per row foot) and size distribution by weight

Variety	Pounds/ Foot	Percent of total weight			
		Small	Medium	Large	Jumbo
Red flesh					
Ruby Queen	0.57	49%	43%	8%	—
Detroit Red	0.67	21%	54%	25%	—
Early Wonder	1.28	15%	20%	27%	38%
Specialty					
Bull's Blood	0.37	59%	41%	—	—
Chiogga	0.55	66%	24%	10%	—
Cylindra	0.78	22%	67%	11%	—
Yellow flesh					
T. Gold	0.85	25%	57%	18%	—
Y. Mangel	0.81	1%	30%	25%	44%

Small = Less than 3 ounces
Medium = 3–6 ounces
Large = 6–10 ounces
Jumbo = Over 10 ounces

Descriptions:

Ruby Queen—Tender, uniform, smooth globular roots with bright red, sweet, high-quality flesh. Excellent for canning.

Early Wonder—Slightly flattened red root. One of the earliest beets, with quick emergence in cold soils. Great for early greens.

Detroit Red—Small, uniform, tender, globular beets with very dark red flesh. Great for pickling, canning and table beets. A good keeper. This is the standard against which table beets are compared.

Bull's Blood—Grown mainly for its deep metallic leaves. The color of the sweet leaves intensifies as the plant matures, especially under cool conditions. The leaves are striking both as baby greens and full sized. Harvest the beets while they're young for best flavor.

Chiogga—The candy-striped flesh is sugary sweet and very tender. The striking red and white rings are retained if baked. Harvest the globular-shaped beet while small for top quality.

Cylindra—Also known as Forono. A good pickling, slicing or table beet. The carrot-shaped beet with dark red flesh grows up to 6 inches long. Its uniform shape is useful in processing, providing a beet with consistent slices. Its skin is easy to peel. The narrow beet lends itself to 2-inch spacing.

Touchstone Gold—New variety. Small, round roots with yellow flesh; retains color when cooked. Extra sweet flavor. Better germination and seedling vigor than other yellow varieties. The leafy greens have a yellow tinge.

Yellow Mangel—Mild-flavored, orange-yellow flesh; color is retained in cooking. The yellow-skinned, tapered beets can get very large (up to several pounds apiece) but remain sweet and tender. Good storage beet.

Seed Sources

In addition to your local garden supplier, many catalogs offer unique beet seeds.

Burpee	*www.burpee.com*
Fedco Seeds	*www.fedcoseeds.com*
Johnny's Selected Seeds	*www.johnnyseeds.com*
Seeds of Change	*www.seedsofchange.com*
Seed Savers Exchange	*www.seedsavers.org*
The Cook's Garden	*www.cooksgarden.com*
Veseys Seeds	*www.veseys.com*

Preparing/Cooking Beets and Beet Greens

by Julie Casio, Extension Faculty
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Beet Greens: When ready to use, wash greens in cool water. Scoop them from the water to rid them of debris that sinks to the bottom. Repeat several times. Discard any large ribs. To cut, stack cleaned leaves, roll the stack into a log and cut crosswise.
Steam: Set greens on a rack in a steamer over boiling water. Cover and cook until tender, about five minutes. Toss with 2 teaspoons lemon juice.
Sauté: Heat a 10-inch skillet over medium heat. Add 1 tablespoon olive oil. Sauté beet greens and 1 minced garlic clove about 5 minutes. Drizzle 1 tablespoon vinegar over greens. Mix and serve as a side dish.

Beets: Gently scrub the beets, being careful not to break the skin, and rinse well. Leave at least 1 inch of stem and the whole root (this preserves color and nutrients). Cooking time will vary according to age and diameter of beet.
Roast: Place beets in a baking dish. Bake in a preheated oven at 400°F for about an hour.
Bake: Season and wrap individual beets in foil, crimping tightly around beet. Place on a baking pan and bake in preheated 375°F oven for an hour.
Boil: Place beets in a pot of boiling water, cover and simmer until beets are just tender, from 30–45 minutes.
Steam: Place beets in steamer basket over boiling water. Cook until tender, about 30–45 minutes.

- The beets are done when a skewer easily penetrates to the center. Allow them to cool enough to handle; peel.
- Peel beets while still warm. Use a paper towel, the foil wrapping or gloves to protect your hands from getting stained.
- Cut beets in wedges, slices, cubes or julienne. If small, serve whole.
- Season and serve warm, or chill and add to salads.

Raw: Grate peeled raw beets for salads and salsa.

For nutrition information and other beet recipes, see the Extension publication *Beets,* FNH-00561A.

In addition to the varieties previously mentioned, Extension publication *Recommended Variety List for Southcentral Alaska,* HGA-00031, lists the following varieties that have done well in that region.

Variety	Maturity	Yield	Comments
Bolt Hardy	Intermediate	High	Solid dark-red round beet, doesn't go to seed
Ruby Queen	Early	High	Uniform, smooth beet
Burpee Golden	Intermediate	Fair	Round beet with golden flesh

Vegetable and Fruit Varieties for Interior Alaska, HGA-00030, also recommends the following varieties.

Variety	Maturity	Yield	Comments
Cylindra	Midseason	Good	Resists bolting, tender sweet, long
Detroit Dark Red	Midseason	Good	Globe shaped
Chioggia	Early	Good	Heirloom, sweet flavor
Red Ace	Early	High	Round, smooth, good greens
Burpee Golden	Midseason	Fair	Yellow, round, high quality

The following varieties are reported to have done well in Southeast Alaska. See *Recommended Variety List for Southest Alaska,* HGA-00231 for more information.

Formanova	Little Egypt	Early Wonder	Little Ball
Cylindra	Bull's Blood	Detroit	Chioggia
Red Ace	White		

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