

Friday's Feature**By****Theresa Friday**

October 15, 2011

Carrots are "cool" season plants

Most of us grew up being told that carrots are good for you, and our parents were right. Many vegetables pack a powerhouse of nutrition and carrots are no exception. They are good sources of vitamin C, vitamin K, potassium and fiber. They are also low in calories, with one cup of chopped carrots providing only about 52 calories.

Freshly harvested carrots have a sweeter flavor than carrots bought in the store. Carrots are conveniently cold hardy and able to withstand freezing temperatures, which makes them a "must-have" in the fall vegetable garden.

Carrots originated in central Asia, perhaps in the area of present-day Afghanistan. Carrots are biennial. They will produce a white flower in the second growing season if the roots are not harvested.



Carrot is a biennial plant which grows a rosette of leaves in the spring and summer, while building up the stout taproot. A flowering stem, with an umbel of white flowers, is produced the second year (left). The most commonly eaten part of a carrot is a taproot, although the greens are edible as well (right). Photo credits: Howard F. Schwartz, Colorado State University, Bugwood.org

In North Florida, carrot seed can be sown in the garden from September through March and typically mature in 70 to 120 days. Both hybrid and open-pollinated varieties are recommended. Hybrid carrot varieties generally are more uniform and have brighter color than open-pollinated varieties.

Choose varieties to suit your soil conditions. If your soil is deep and loose, any variety will do well but the very long market types are usually preferred such as Danvers, Imperator, and Nantes. For heavier type soils, it would be best to grow the shorter types such as Chantenay or Oxheart. Always use fresh seed.

Carrots have difficulty growing in compacted soils, which can cause deformed, stubby roots. Adding organic matter to the garden bed and breaking up the ground to a depth of 24 inches before planting will lessen the problem of deformed roots. Always be sure to wait a couple of weeks after the addition of organic matter before sowing your seeds. Garden areas with known nematode infestations should be avoided because of the deformities these pests may cause.

The pH of the soil should be adjusted to about 6.5. Remember to always have a soil test done to determine your lime requirement prior to adding lime. Too much lime is as bad as not enough.

Novice gardeners often complain about poor seed germination. Carrots cannot tolerate either deep planting or a dry seedbed, so the trick is to manage shallow planting with a continuously moist soil. Frequent light irrigation is done until the seeds sprout. Carrots do have a high demand for water during their rapid growth and root development.

Where they are to be planted, level the ground and rake out all dirt clods or non-decomposed organic matter and smooth the surface. Moisten the soil and then scatter seed atop the ground without making a furrow or hole to receive them. Cover the seed with a thin layer (no more than ¼ inch) of soil or screened compost. Rows should be approximately 10 to 12 inches apart.

The seedlings should be allowed to grow until they have a few strong leaves. At that time you should thin the plants so that individual plants are one to three inches apart. Thinning is critical. Allowing carrots to stay crowded close together will lead to poor root expansion and bushy tops.

To save space in the garden, try some companion planting. Planting long and short-season plants together, like carrots and radishes, makes best use of the space. Radishes can be harvested around 21 days after planting, just about the time the carrots need the room.

Harvest can begin when carrots are finger size and continue through the winter as needed. Drench the bed with water for easy harvesting. Pull the carrots by grabbing the greens at their crowns and gently tugging

with a twisting motion.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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