



Urban Harvest

Growing gardens. Enriching lives.

Plant Carrots & Beets: Take Advantage of Autumn

Bob Randall

Those of us who have spent September in the north know that autumn there is frequently dramatic with first frosts, leaves turning red golden, then falling and blowing, and birds fleeing south for winter. September here is much more subtle, but if you observe what is happening in the garden, there is plenty of drama as well.

Hummingbirds come back to the coral honeysuckle and Hamelia. Figs and early blooming trees begin to lose their leaves. Very early daffodils like Soleil d'Or shoot tips out of the soil because the shorter days and longer nights are dropping soil temperatures, and a dramatic increase in northern winds drops air temperatures at least a little for days on end.

September is the first month since February that more wind blows out of the north than out of the south. For the next three months, there will be nearly equal hours of winds from both the north--northeast, and from the southeast--south, so temperatures will increasingly become more moderate. This makes it an excellent time to plant vegetables that thrive in cooler weather, but need several months to mature before it gets cold.

Carrots

First on the list are carrots. People who have only eaten the trade carrot varieties like Imperator that have been developed for shipping, appearance, and long storage, are often astonished at the sweet delicious flavors of newly dug "gardener's" carrots like the Nantes varieties. Such carrots have better flavors, are naturally much sweeter, and since they are not out of the ground more than a few hours before eating, never have the chance to convert their sugars to starches. It is in fact common for children in the community gardens who realize what these carrots taste like, to dig and eat several per day, day after day for weeks.

There are only a few things you must do for success. Purchase high quality fresh seed and keep it dry in a refrigerator until planting. My favorite is an heirloom French variety called Touchon, available to Urban Harvest members or online from Cook's Garden, but any Nantes type will be vastly better than what's in supermarkets. At our house, we grow a lot of carrots because we like them and they can be harvested daily for about five months once they are harvestable, so one small seed packet is not enough for us.

You can plant carrots any time from September 1st until about February, but roots harvested in cool December soil will be tastier, and carrots stop growing for many weeks if a hard freeze hits before

they are of edible size, so the best time of the year for planting is the first half of September. A second good time is late December.

Once you have fresh seed, and an 8-inch raised bed with a good quality fertilized loam cleared of weeds, you are ready to plant. Rake or shallow cultivate your soil with a claw tool so that the soil will be loose in the top two inches. Put your seeds in your hand and scatter them lightly about the ground trying to drop a couple of seeds per square inch. There is no reason to make rows. Not all the seeds will sprout, but those that do, will mature well if they have one-inch or greater spacings. After broadcasting the seed, lightly tamp with your hand the soil where they dropped.

Once this is done, the most important work is next. You need to water the seedbed and keep it damp two weeks or more until the carrots are two inches high at least. If you don't, the young carrot sprouts on the hot soil surface will die. The best way to water is to sprinkle with a fan nozzle at least every morning and especially for the first week in hot weather later in the day.

Once the carrots are growing well, weed the bed to prevent competition, and thin the carrots so they are at least one inch apart. At one inch, you can get 144 carrots in a square foot! Once the tops are eight inches high or more, put your fingers on the ground on each side of a stem and feel the root's top. If it is more than 3/4 inch, pull it (using water if necessary to loosen soil), wash it in a bucket and enjoy.

Beets

Although beets are unrelated botanically to carrots, their culture is in many ways quite similar, and the huge difference between the homegrown types and the storage ones is also similar.

People who only know the Detroit Red trade beets found in the supermarkets are astonished how delicious sweet heirloom varieties of beet like Chioggia are. As well, the greens are an outstanding vegetable in themselves, because they are similar to their close relatives: spinach and chard.

Beets grow best at 60-degree temperatures. That temperature is typical of mid-November in much of Houston. Beets take about 60 days to mature and need to be mature before December 1st to assure sufficient growth, so it is best to plant them from late September to mid-October.

Beet seed are actually small capsules containing several seeds. I plant them about one fingernail deep four inches apart in all directions. Prepare the bed in the same way you did carrots.

As with carrots, keep them quite damp until they are clearly visible. If you see several seedlings coming up from the same seed capsule, you can transplant them before they get more than an inch high. Late in the day, wet the soil, dig them up with your finger, separate the little plants and re-plant at 4-inch centers. Continue to keep them watered. Beets are harvested when the visible roots are plum to tennis-ball-sized. Greens are cooked like spinach. Enjoy!

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