

## The Beautiful Beet

Did you know that New York State is the second leading commercial beet producer, with many of them being grown and processed in nearby Genesee County? While they are most often sold in cans or jars, they are also available fresh, especially during June and July. Beets have been popular for centuries because of the vegetable's array of colors, nutrient value and versatility. One variety, the Chioggia, has a cherry-red exterior that, when cut, reveals its true stripes, which are alternating red and white.

One of the world's first food writers, Lucius Junius Moderatus Columella, who wrote on agricultural topics during the first century A.D., claims that the beet got its original name, *beta*, because of its resemblance to the second letter of the alphabet. In Columella's time, and even earlier, beets were eaten everywhere from Britain to India.

Both the darkish purple root and the brilliant green leaves of this colorful vegetable are edible and rich in nutrients. Beets are an excellent source of folate and good sources of potassium, vitamin C and fiber. They are low in calories and free of fat and cholesterol, but with a sweet flavor. The leaves of the beet, called beet greens, are also nutritious containing vitamins A and C, potassium and magnesium, iron and calcium.

Mixed together in a bowl, an assortment of many-colored beets makes an intriguing salad, especially since all beets taste just about the same. They must be cooked separately, however, because the red dye, betacyanin, leaches into the cooking water. Some say that a dash of vinegar or lemon juice added to the cooking water reduces leaching.

In this country the beet has regional specialties: greens are most popular in the South, the roots appeal to New Englanders for use in both red flannel hash and sweet-and-sour Harvard beets. The Pennsylvania Dutch classic, pickled beets and red eggs, is crimson testimony to the vegetable's painterly talents. Beet dye was, in fact, used in colonial times to add a rosy color to cake icing and to create pink pancakes.

When you buy beets, choose firm, round beets with a slender tap root, which is the root at the bottom. Look for a smooth surface that is blemish free without soft, rough or shriveled spots. Avoid long beets with round, scaly areas around the top surface. These beets will usually be tough and strong flavored. Wilted, flabby beets have been exposed to air and are not a good choice for purchase. When selecting fresh greens, look for greens with no sign of discoloration, ragged edges or yellowing leaves.

To prepare the beet roots, scrub thoroughly with a brush, do not trim the root, but leave in the stems above the crown when leaves are trimmed. Place in boiling, salted water to cover; simmer; and peel off or rub off skins. Tender young whole beets require 30-45 minutes of cooking time; sliced or diced beets just 15-20 minutes. To prepare the greens, wash and put in small amount of boiling water, just enough to start the wilting process and steam for 10-15 minutes or until tender. You can store beets by cutting off the greens, leaving an inch on the beet, and place the unwashed beets in a plastic bag. The

roots will keep in the refrigerator crisper for up to 3 weeks; in the freezer up to 6 months. The beet greens should be used as soon as possible, as they will keep for only a few days even in a plastic bag in the refrigerator crisper.

For more information on beets and beet recipes, visit <http://panen.psu.edu/intranet/snap/beet/index.htm> or call Cornell Cooperative Extension at (585) 394-3977 x409 or x425.

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