

WHAT'S IN SEASON?

Root Vegetables

BY BARBARA KOB SAR

Roots rule the vegetable stands as cooler weather sets in. They weave their way into the upcoming season of celebrations and comfort foods, showing up in appetizers, soups, stews, and pies. Rich in flavor, vitamins, and dietary fiber, root vegetables are the right choices for right now.

Though root vegetables grow underground, they really have nothing to hide. Carrots, beets, rutabaga, and turnips are true roots (taproots), and boast striking shades of burgundy, orange, and purple. Even ivory-colored daikon and parsnip have their charm. Sweet potatoes (and other potatoes) are tuberous roots, and like all root vegetables, they flourish in light, loose, well-drained soil while developing their true shapes.

CARROTS

California is the leading producer of carrots for the nation, and so a local, freshly harvested bunch is never far away. More than 80 varieties are grown worldwide, of which many are hybrid variations on the standards: Danvers, Nantes, Emperor, and Chantenay. Carrots may be orange, scarlet, purple, or white, and range from long and narrow to stubby and almost round. The freshest carrots will be those with bright green leafy tops still attached. Once you get them home, twist off the tops and toss them in the compost pile, since they continue to draw moisture from the carrot if left on.

Childhood memories of “baby” carrots from the garden still linger, so tender and sweet. Little did I know that by pulling out a few small carrots every so often I was helping to thin the rows, making room for the others to grow. All varieties of carrots may be harvested and eaten at that very young stage, but specific varieties that mature when small, such as “Lady Finger” and “Short and Sweet,” tend to offer even more taste and color.



PARSNIPS

Ivory-colored parsnips closely resemble their cousin carrots, but their subtle, sweet, and nutty taste comes through better cooked than raw. A touch of frost in the garden improves the flavor in parsnips by converting some of the stored starch to sugar.

Parsnips were particularly popular in the times of root cellars because of their excellent storage qualities. They remain nutritious and relatively inexpensive, but with a plethora of other vegetables to choose from, parsnips struggle for attention, it seems. Use them in soups and stews as you would potatoes, or enjoy them as a side dish—season with a little butter and chopped fresh tarragon.

BEETS

The garnet-red beets we find on our dinner tables are but one delectable member of the beet family. Other members include foliage beets (grown specifically for their tops), Swiss chard, and sugar beets.

Beets are common and available year-round, but this time of year look for an Italian heirloom called Chioggia (candy-cane red on the outside, with alternating red and white rings inside), as well as Little Ball (a true baby beet) and mild-flavored golden beets. If I'm on the hunt to find a beet

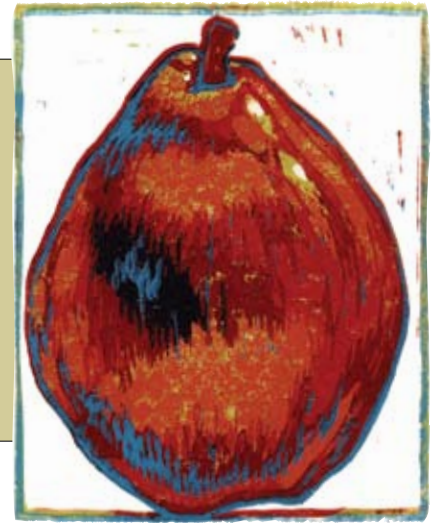
to make uniform slices for a salad, I'll look for *Cylindra*, which grows up to eight inches long and a couple of inches in diameter.

Beet tops or greens are a powerhouse in the nutrition department. If the tops are small and tender, I toss them into a salad, where they add a mild earthy flavor. More-mature leaves are better quick-cooked, as you would spinach.

I prefer baking beets to boiling them, since baking retains flavor and juices. Wash and trim off tops leaving about an inch attached to the beet to prevent the color from bleeding. Place small to medium size beets in an ovenproof dish, drizzle with olive oil, cover and bake at 375° for about an hour, or until tender. Cool slightly before slipping off the skins and trimming the stem and roots.

BEST CHOICES IN FALL/WINTER PRODUCE

Artichoke	Daikon Radish	Persimmons
Apples	Dried Fruits	Pomegranates
Beets	Fennel	Raisins
Brussels Sprouts	Kohlrabi	Rutabaga
Cabbage	Nuts	Sweet Potatoes
Carrots	Parsnips	Turnip
Citrus	Pears	Winter Squash



The artwork on these pages is by Linda Pedersen.
Read more about her work on page 4

One of my favorite tricks is to add beet greens to pasta at the end of the cooking time. They'll turn the pasta pink and make a tasty and nutritious addition to the dish.

TURNIPS AND RUTABAGAS

These frost-hardy, globe-shaped roots belong to the cabbage family. Turnips are fast growing and may produce two crops per year, while rutabagas take their time, generally coming up with a single crop in the fall.

Pale yellow- or white-skinned turnips sport a pretty purple blush around the top and range in size from mini to monstrous. Their mild flavor is perfect in a sauté with pears. Cut peeled turnips and cored Bosc pears into ¼-inch slices. Sauté turnips in a dab of butter for 6 or 7 minutes, then add pears and a thinly sliced shallot. Cook and toss for 3 minutes. Add ½ cup walnut halves, salt and pepper to taste, and a squeeze of fresh lemon. Heat through for a couple of minutes and serve immediately. Deliciously different!

Rutabagas are in fact a cross between Savoy cabbage and turnip and are yellowish inside and out, with varying amounts of burgundy color at the crown. If my plan is a simple cook and mash, I choose rutabagas over turnips, since they do not contain as much moisture and offer an earthy flavor with a hint of sweetness.

SWEET POTATOES

No root story is complete without sweet potatoes. Sweet potatoes are like wine—the longer they “sit,” or cure, the better they get. Curing sweet potatoes is done by holding them in a controlled, high-heat, high-humidity environment to allow the conversion of starch to sugar; hence the name sweet potato. But fear not—one serving of sweet potatoes has only 145 calories and they deliver your total recommended daily allowance of vitamin A.

Sweet potatoes are divided into two groups according to texture. One is moist and sweet and the other dry, mealy, and a little less sweet. The more favored moist varieties characteristically have deep orange flesh. (These are mistakenly referred to as yams, but true yams are not related to sweet potatoes and are indigenous to Asia, while sweet potatoes are native to and grown in North and South America.)

All types of sweet potatoes are ideal for baking, roasting, and steaming. Moist varieties are particularly good in pies, cakes, and breads. Dry varieties are more like regular potatoes and make excellent chips and hash browns.

Enjoy, and see you at the farmers' markets!

Barbara Kobsar is a home economist and spends part of every week at the East Bay farmers' markets scoping out fresh produce. She has spent almost 20 years as a freelance writer for newspapers, magazines and newsletters, featuring in-season produce. She has also authored two cookbooks focusing on traditional home-cooked meals using local produce. When not roaming the produce isles she is behind her market stand selling her Cottage Kitchen jams and jellies she makes from produce from the farmers markets. Contact her at cotkitchen@aol.com

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