



# Beets and Swiss Chard

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Old time gardeners are often surprised to learn that the novice isn't aware that beet greens can be eaten. Many novices don't know that not only are beet greens nutritious, they are delicious. This really isn't difficult to understand though, as this delicacy is not found in the local grocery store. It is one of those special treats reserved for gardeners.

The beet and its closer-than-cousin relative, Swiss chard, originated in the region around the Mediterranean Sea. The earliest known forms of beets were leafy plants like Swiss chard without enlarged roots. It was not until the late 16th century that large-root beets were described in German literature. Beets and Swiss chard are relatively easy crops to grow and usually have no serious insect or disease problems.

## Plant About Two Weeks Before Last Frost

Beets and Swiss chard are half-hardy vegetables that may be planted two weeks before the last killing frost. Beets can be sown successively at about three week intervals to ensure a continuous harvest until late spring, then again in late summer for fall harvest. Beets are not harmed by spring and fall frosts. However, the roots become tough in the summer if the daytime temperatures exceed 80F for long periods.

Since each beet seed is actually a fruit containing three or four seeds, plants will come up in bunches. When the first true leaves appear, remove all but the strongest seedling. When the plants are 6 inches tall, thin again to about 3 inches apart. Young, developing beet roots are excellent for eating when they are about 1 inch in diameter.

## Most Take About 60 To 70 Days

In most varieties, the mature root reaches 2 to 3 inches in diameter about 60 to 70 days from seeding. Detroit Dark Red and Ruby Queen are two of the best varieties for use in Virginia. Both have an excellent deep-red color. A beet variety I particularly like is Cylindra. Its 6- to 8-inch roots are uniform in diameter, making them very easy to process.

Swiss chard requires only one planting as it is grown for its leaves alone. Only the outside leaves are picked and the rapid-growing inner leaves quickly replenish the harvest. Swiss chard will require thinning to about 4 inches apart. The young plants you pull can be cooked for greens.

## Red Has Excellent Flavor, But Green Gives Higher Production

The red variety of Swiss chard, rhubarb, has an excellent flavor and colorful wine-red leaves, but I consistently get higher production from green-leafed varieties, such as Fordhook Giant and Swiss Chard of Geneva.

Swiss chard can be treated as a two-part crop in that the deeply crinkled leaves have prominent central ribs up to 2

inches across that can be cut away from the rest of the leaf to be cooked and served similar to asparagus. The remainder of the green blade is cooked like spinach although it is considerably milder. It is important with Swiss chard to continuously harvest the foliage as it reaches 8 to 12 inches. Older, tough leaves left on the plant will prevent the plant from producing fresh foliage.

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