Beets *by Cliff Winter*

Latin name: *Beta vulgaris*
Family: Goosefoot Family (Chenopodiaceae)
Variety: Green Top Bunching

Beets are common root vegetables that stand out from other produce due to their dark red color. Table beets (different than sugar beets) are popular in European cuisines. The plant thrives in cold climates and Germany, France, Russia, and the U.K. are leaders in beet cultivation. Used often in salads and soups, the entire plant is edible and can be boiled, baked, steamed, or eaten raw. There are some tricks to cooking with beets, most notably is how to clean up because they will produce stains.

In my younger days, I would help my mother in the garden, along with the process of harvesting and preserving the fruits of our labor. One of the crops we grew were beets. I remember the purple hands I got from peeling the beets to get them ready for canning. As years went by, the garden and our stay-at-home family got smaller; beets were no longer a part of my summer labors. When I started raising my own family and garden patch, beets were never thought of as a desire to grow. Not until years later, I fell into the smoothie craze for health reasons and started making smoothies every day. I read numerous recipes to get the healthiest results. Beets were one of the vegetables I came across. When looking in the produce section of grocery stores, beets were seldom found. When they were, the price was high compared to most other vegetables. My solution: grow my own.

My first attempt in the cultivation of beets was poor, pulling out of the soil only a couple of edible beets. Doing more reading, than just the back of the seed packet, improved my results.

Here are some facts I found out:

- Soil should be a deep loam and well drained.
- A pH level of 6.0-7.0 is ideal.
- Plant when temperature is 60-67 degrees.
- Keep seeds moist, but not waterlogged.
- Plant as soon as soil can be worked to a depth of one-half inch with a spacing of 2 to 3 inches, leaving room for growth. You can plant closer, then thin out as plant emerges. Rows 18-24 inches apart.
- The time from planting to harvest is anywhere from 45-80 days.
- Once plant emerges, side dress with a 10-10-10 fertilizer.
- Once harvested, beets can be stored indoors for a month or more. Trim off leaves, leaving ½ tuft of stems at top of root, brush off soil and store in an unsealed plastic bag in your refrigerator's crisper.

You can enjoy beets many ways such as: using the entire beet in salads, buttered beets, roasted and pickled beets. As stated earlier, I enjoy them in a smoothie, the whole beet, raw with tops, along with fruit and almond milk, all blended. Beets give the smoothie a bright red color along with many vitamins.

Photos by Cliff Winter

References: pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/dam/pubs_ext.../426-422-pdf.pdf
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