

# like broccoli?



# try these!



'Spigariello Liscia'



'Piracicaba'



Romanesco





Unfortunately for my kids, we eat broccoli at least three times a week — sometimes more! They tolerate it, but they don't have a deep affection for it like I do.

If you're a broccoli fan like me, though, you're definitely going to want to add a few of the following broccoli-like vegetables to your garden. 'Spigariello Liscia' broccoli is one. It's not your conventional supermarket broccoli — heck, I don't think you'd even find it at large-scale farmers' markets — and it's grown for its broccoli-flavored leaves. Yes, leaves, not flower buds.

Or how about sea kale? It yields large broccoli-like buds as well as kale-like foliage, but you're not going to see it next to cauliflower and cabbage at the grocery store. Another favorite is Romanesco broccoli, which has incredibly complex heads

with tiny, mesmerizing swirls. They're also delicious, with a mild, nutty flavor that takes very well to roasting. Happily, most of these are very easy to grow, demanding just sunshine, fertile soil, and regular moisture.

## TRY THIS!

# 'Spigariello Liscia' Broccoli

### BROCCOLI LOVERS WILL APPRECIATE

this Italian leaf-type relative that is grown primarily for its broccoli-flavored leaves. 'Spigariello Liscia' is a true broccoli, unlike broccoli raab, which is a member of the turnip family (hence, its strong flavor). The broccoli flavor of 'Spigariello Liscia' has overtones of kale, as well as a texture that is similar to some of the more tender kale varieties, like 'Lacinato'. The plants will eventually produce small edible florets, but it's those beautiful blue-green leaves that make this a green worth growing.

### GROWING

'Spigariello Liscia' should be grown like broccoli; give it a 4- to 6-week head start by sowing the seeds under grow lights indoors. In the garden, space them about 18 inches apart, planting in compost-enriched soil in a sunny garden bed. Alternatively, direct sow seed 2 weeks before the last expected spring frost, spacing 2 inches apart. Thin to 18 inches when seedlings are growing well. For a fall crop, start seedlings indoors in early summer and transplant them into the garden about 10 weeks before your first expected fall frost.

If cabbageworms are a common problem in your garden, cover seedlings with a lightweight row cover right after planting. The cover can be left on the entire growing season; the plants don't need to be pollinated to produce their crop of leaves and baby buds.

### EATING!

Pick individual leaves as needed. The young flower buds (or even edible yellow flowers) can also be harvested as a secondary crop. Prep the leaves for cooking by de-stringing them; the tough center ribs can be sliced out with a knife, but it's quicker (and more fun) to gently fold the leaves and pull the rib out — just like the string on a bean or pea. Use the chopped leaves as you would kale in Italian soups (it's great in bean soups), or like spinach in lasagna. It's also great wilted in a quick sauté with olive oil and garlic or slivered into robust fall salads.

### THE DETAILS

**A.K.A.:** Leaf broccoli,  
*Brassica oleracea*  
var. *italica*

### DAYS TO MATURITY:

45 days for leaves,  
70 days for flower  
buds

### HAILS FROM:

Mediterranean region

### VARIETY TO TRY:

'Spigariello Liscia'



'Spigariello  
Liscia'



'Piracicaba' broccoli





## TRY THIS!

# 'Piracicaba' Broccoli

**AT THE RISK OF SOUNDING** a little like a used car salesman, "Have I got a broccoli for you!" It's the perfect broccoli for people who don't like broccoli. And those who already love this nutrient-dense veggie will have a new favorite for their gardens. 'Piracicaba' broccoli was developed in Brazil and is heat tolerant, frost tolerant, easy to grow, and incredibly productive. and it has a mild, sweet flavor that has to be tried to be believed.

Unlike regular broccoli that forms a large, tight dome of teeny beads, this is grown for its long harvest of tender side shoots, as well as the edible leaves. The side shoots differ slightly in appearance from those on typical garden broccoli; they're looser in form with noticeably large beads. The plants are also a little more casual in appearance, growing 2 to 3 feet tall and wide, with a more relaxed growth habit.

## PLANT FOR SUMMER AND WINTER HARVEST

Grow 'Piracicaba' the same way you would grow regular broccoli, as detailed in the description for 'Spigariello Liscia' (see page 153). Plant in full sun, in compost-amended beds, and protect from common broccoli pests like cabbageworms.

'Piracicaba' holds well into the summer and will continue to pump out months of high-quality, bite-size flower buds. Regular harvesting will encourage continual cropping, as will regular moisture and an occasional dose of fish emulsion.

Sow a fall crop indoors in early summer and move the plants into the garden 10 to

12 weeks before the first expected fall frost. With the protection of a mini hoop tunnel, my 'Piracicaba' remains harvestable into December.

## TENDER SHOOTS AND LEAVES

The first harvest comes from the center head, a modest 2-inch-wide flower bud that should be removed to initiate side-shoot production. As the side shoots develop, you can remove them individually or by cutting a 6- to 8-inch-long cluster of shoots and leaves. These can be steamed, stir-fried, or cooked in the same way as broccoli or broccoli raab. Unlike broccoli raab, however, the flavor of 'Piracicaba' remains sweet and mild.

Note that the tender florets need less cooking time than those of regular broccoli and need to be steamed for only a minute or two. Don't forget that the leaves are edible — and delicious! 'Piracicaba' produces more leaves than common garden broccoli, so expect a generous harvest. The stems can also be eaten, or grated into slaw. They, too, have a mild, sweet flavor.

## THE DETAILS

**A.K.A.:** *Brassica oleracea* var. *italica*

## DAYS TO MATURITY:

80 days from direct seed, 56 days from transplant

## HAILS FROM:

Mediterranean region

## VARIETY TO TRY:

'Piracicaba'



## TRY THIS!

# Romanesco Broccoli

### THE DETAILS

**A.K.A.:** Roman cauliflower, broccoflower, *Brassica oleracea* var. *botrytis*

**DAYS TO MATURITY:**  
80 days

**HAILS FROM:**  
Mediterranean region

**VARIETIES TO TRY:**  
'Veronica', a hybrid more reliable and disease resistant than the standard Romanesco; 'Gitano'

**WITH ITS MESMERIZING, COMPLEX**, spiraling heads, this is arguably the most visually appealing member of the broccoli clan. It also has a knockout flavor that is mild and almost nutty — reminiscent of both its relatives, broccoli and cauliflower. In truth, Romanesco broccoli is neither broccoli nor cauliflower, but is in a class all its own! Since cauliflower is one of my favorite vegetables, I tend to cook this crop in a similar way; roasted into caramelized, crispy bites, it rivals potato chips as an addictive snack.

Since I'm being totally honest, though, I will say that — like cauliflower — Romanesco broccoli isn't the easiest crop to grow. It's prone to buttoning (producing tiny heads), cabbageworms, slugs, and just general sulking. For pure novelty and flavor, though, it's worth a try!

### ELBOW ROOM AND GENTLE HANDLING

Start these as you would broccoli, seeding them indoors 6 to 8 weeks before the last expected frost, eventually moving them to a sunny garden bed amended with plenty of compost. I avoid manure, as excess nitrogen can prevent Romanesco from heading up. With regular broccoli, I sow the seeds in

cell packs, but in the case of Romanesco, I prefer 4-inch pots, which give them plenty of room to grow and develop into good-size plants, about 6 inches tall. When you're ready to transplant, minimize setback by not disturbing the rootball and watering them in immediately.

The plants get big, so spacing is important. Planting them too close can result in small or no heads, so plant them at least 1½ to 2 feet apart. Use the empty space between the tiny seedlings to interplant a quick-growing crop of leaf lettuce, radishes, or Japanese turnips.

I prefer to grow Romanesco as a fall crop, because I find the plants are more successful as the temperature begins to decline and there are (knock on wood) fewer pests. For a fall crop, start seeds indoors, 10 to 12 weeks before your last expected frost, and move them to the garden in midsummer. Water often and mulch with shredded leaves or straw.

Harvest entire heads while they are slightly immature (about 6 inches in diameter) and are still firm to the touch. Eat them raw (dipped in anything!) or roasted in the oven until they are lightly browned.





## TRY THIS! Gai Lan

**I CAME TO GROW GAI LAN** in our gardens because I found it hard to source locally. And trust me, this isn't a vegetable you want to be without. It's extremely versatile in the kitchen and super quick to prepare. One of my favorite ingredients in stir-fries and fried rice, it can also stand on its own as a flavorful side dish. The plants look like broccoli on a diet; they're about half the height, up to 16 inches tall, and are more slender than typical broccoli plants. This makes gai lan an especially great choice for small-space gardeners.

If the name "gai lan" doesn't sound familiar, perhaps you know this popular vegetable as Chinese broccoli, white-flowering broccoli, kailaan, or Chinese kale. Gai lan is harvested as a shoot with thick stems, large blue-green leaves, and small flower buds. It tastes like broccoli, but slightly stronger, and is generally not bitter. I say "generally," because if plants are left in the garden too long, the flavor can sharpen and acquire a mild peppery zing.

### WAIT FOR BUDS, THEN HARVEST

Gai lan is grown the same way as broccoli, but it's easier and more reliable, and it adapts to a wider range of growing conditions. Start the seeds indoors and move them to the garden 4 to 5 weeks later. Give them full sun and rich soil, with a 10- to 12-inch spacing. In areas prone to drought, water regularly for the best-quality crop and apply an organic mulch to discourage weeds and retain soil moisture.



Gai lan

You can pick the plants bud-free as baby gai lan, but we prefer to wait until the main stem is topped with small clusters of flower buds. When the buds appear, snip about 8 inches of the stem with several leaves still attached. Then leave the plant to regrow (a little fish emulsion fertilizer is a good idea at this time); it will continue to push out smaller side shoots for a few weeks.

The easiest — and perhaps the best — way to serve this versatile crop is "Hong Kong style." This starts with a quick stir-fry in a tablespoon or two of garlic- and ginger-infused oil. After 2 to 3 minutes, add a splash of vegetable or chicken broth and cover the pan to allow the fragrant mixture to steam for 4 to 5 minutes. Drain and drizzle with oyster sauce and sesame oil. Seriously good.

#### THE DETAILS

**A.K.A.:** Chinese broccoli, Chinese kale, kai-lan, kailaan, *Brassica oleracea* var. *alboglabra*

#### DAYS TO MATURITY:

60–70 days

#### HAILS FROM:

Mediterranean region

#### VARIETIES TO TRY:

'Green Jade' and 'Green Lance' give a more uniform harvest; 'Green Lance' is 10 days earlier than open-pollinated varieties.





## TRY THIS! Sea Kale

### THE DETAILS

**A.K.A.:** *Crambe maritima*

### DAYS TO MATURITY:

Perennial in  
Zones 5–9

### HAILS FROM:

European coast  
(Atlantic)

### VARIETY TO TRY:

Consider trying the  
related giant colewort.

**WHEN IS KALE NOT KALE?** When it's sea kale, of course! Sea kale is an ancient member of the cabbage family that has been embraced by modern permaculturalists who appreciate its hardiness, longevity, and numerous edible parts, including florets that can be harvested and eaten like broccoli. It has a relaxed growing habit, forming a 2- to 3-foot-tall spreading mound with large silvery green leaves that are tinged with purple.

Although it's called sea kale, and is indeed salt tolerant, it grows very well in a regular vegetable bed. You can tuck some into a mixed border or flower garden, where it will return year after year and produce tiny, white, fragrant flowers that are highly attractive to pollinators and beneficial insects.

### SLOW BUT RELIABLE

This is not a quick-growing plant, but once it's established, it will be a reliable, drought-tolerant, low-maintenance perennial. It's hard to find transplants for sea kale at garden centers and nurseries, but you can easily source seeds through online catalogs. Sow them indoors at least 8 to 10 weeks before the last expected frost. However, germination rates are typically

very low, in the 20 to 30 percent range, so plant more seeds than you think you will need. Germination can also be very slow, taking several weeks.

As the seedlings grow, transplant them into 6-inch pots. In late fall of the first year, move them into a greenhouse, cold frame, or mini hoop tunnel to overwinter. Or plant them in the garden and mulch them with a deep layer of straw or shredded leaves.

Remember that this is a perennial plant, so find a spot that meets its needs: full sun to partial shade, and excellent soil drainage. Raised beds work very well for sea kale. Keep established plants happy with a fall application of rotted manure or compost.

### WAIT, THEN HARVEST

As with asparagus, another popular perennial crop, resist harvesting the spring shoots of sea kale for the first 2 years. You can pick the summer leaves (eat like kale or 'Spigariello Liscia' broccoli) and immature flower buds (eat like broccoli), but don't disturb the spring growth. By year 3, you can start harvesting those tender shoots when the plants emerge in early spring. Traditionally, shoots are covered with a cachepot or a bucket to blanch them (and force them to produce an earlier crop). After forcing, allow the plant to grow naturally. You can continue to eat the young leaves, but as the season progresses and the plants switch to flowering, the foliage quickly toughens up. Harvest the flower buds in summer before they open and prepare them like broccoli.

## TRY THIS!

# Huauzontle

**ALSO CALLED AZTEC SPINACH**, this ancient quinoa cousin originates from Mexico and offers a variety of edible parts: leafy greens, quinoalike grains, and dense clusters of flower buds that you can cook and eat like broccoli. The flavor of huauzontle (pronounced wah-zont-lay) does hint of broccoli, but it also has a peppery kick and undertones of spinach.

To grow huauzontle, start the seeds indoors 4 to 5 weeks before the last expected frost, or direct seed in mid-spring, when the soil has warmed to 50°F (10°C). The seeds are small, so just scatter them on the soil surface and gently tamp them down to ensure good soil-seed contact. Aim to space them about 3 inches apart. Once they've emerged and are growing well, thin the plants to 12 inches apart. Water weekly if there has been no rain, and fertilize occasionally with a fish emulsion.

Like quinoa and amaranth, the young leaves can be picked and eaten throughout the growing season. Harvest individual leaves as needed, taking no more than one-quarter at a time. Overharvesting can delay the production of flower buds. Use the leaves like you would spinach: raw in salads and sandwiches; cooked in curry, stir-fries, dips, and gratins. The plants will grow quite tall, 4 to 5 feet, and by midsummer the large clusters of flower buds will emerge. The bud clusters can be steamed or boiled as you would broccoli.

You can turn the bud clusters into fritters, a traditional Mexican dish eaten during Lent. To make them, begin by

removing the florets from the stems. This can be a time-consuming process, but one that is made quicker with several sets of hands. Once de-stemmed, rinse the florets with a fine-mesh strainer under running water and boil for 8 to 10 minutes. They should be bright green after cooking, but tender. These can be mixed with Mexican cheese and dipped into an egg-based batter and fried. The fritters are served on a bed of tomato sauce.

### THE DETAILS

**A.K.A.:** *Chenopodium nuttalliae*

**DAYS TO MATURITY:**  
80 days

**HAILS FROM:** Mexico

**VARIETIES TO TRY:**  
None





# like carrots?





# grow unusual varieties

'Lunar White'

'Yellowstone'

'Red Samurai'

'Atomic Red'

'Cosmic Purple'





**GROWING UP, I THOUGHT CARROTS** were all orange. In fact, the original wild carrot from which all others are descended was actually white, forked, and spindly. Somewhere along the way, the roots of the wild carrot were transformed into those of the sweet orange carrot gardeners today know and love. That journey is thought to have taken around a thousand years, with the first domesticated carrots probably being purple or yellow. Orange carrots are the result of relatively modern breeding and likely resulted from crosses with yellow carrots about 400 years ago.

It's only in recent years that colored carrots have made a comeback, showing off their bold array of colors as well as subtle flavor differences. We plant several beds and cold frames of carrots each spring, as well as in midsummer for a fall and winter harvest. Like most gardeners, we grow a handful of orange varieties, but we also love to experiment with the many white, red, yellow, and purple carrots now found in seed catalogs. Gardeners with less space can buy premixed packets of rainbow carrots, but I like to blend my own by picking my favorite varieties and mixing them together.

Everyone loves to taste test our rainbow carrots, trying to detect how the flavors change from one color to the next. Purple carrots have a sweetness, but they often have a spicy hint of pepper, too. Red carrots taste similar to orange carrots but are slightly less sweet. White and yellow carrots are mild with fewer sugars than orange varieties, and little of the earthiness often associated with carrots.

'Atomic Red'



## TRY THIS! Colorful, Craveworthy Carrots

**'ATOMIC RED'** (75 days). My kids call these “tomato carrots” — not because of their dazzling coral-red color, but because I’ve told them that the roots contain lycopene, an antioxidant that gives fruits like watermelon and tomatoes their characteristic red hue. ‘Atomic Red’ carrots have become a favorite in our garden and have proven to be reliable and easy to grow. The Emperor-type roots will grow 8 to 10 inches long and have a mildly sweet taste that deepens after frost.

**'PUSA ASITA BLACK'** (75 days). This dramatic purple-black carrot was developed in India, with nutrient-dense roots high in anthocyanins, which give them their dark color. The mildly sweet, earthy flavor is definitely best after a frost, so be patient and plant them for a fall and winter harvest. The roots grow 5 to 6 inches long. Be warned that the color bleeds into cooked dishes; so they’re not good for the soup pot, unless you like purple soup! Enjoy the roots raw — they look amazing when grated with orange carrots for a slaw or salad — or steam, stir-fry, or roast them by themselves. It’s open-pollinated and biennial, so let a few of the roots overwinter for seed collecting the following summer.

**'COSMIC PURPLE'** (70 days). One summer, when my daughter was about 6 years old, she decided that she only wanted to eat purple vegetables. Sigh. We muddled



'Pusa Asita Black'





through and discovered that there are actually *a lot* of purple veggies: tomatoes, potatoes, kohlrabi, eggplant, peas, beans, peppers, cabbage, and her top pick, carrots. 'Cosmic Purple' has been growing in our garden ever since. The roots grow

to 7 inches long and have a sweet, slightly spicy flavor. The dark purple skin contrasts nicely with the bright orange core, and the thin skin doesn't need to be peeled; just scrub and eat!

**'PURPLE DRAGON'** (70 days). Purple on the outside, orange on the inside, 'Purple Dragon' is a beautiful carrot with slender 6- to 7-inch-long roots. It was bred by noted American breeder Dr. John Navazio. Like many dark-colored carrots, this variety has a pleasing combination of sweet-spicy flavor; it's also rich in anthocyanins and contains lycopene. To take full advantage of the cool color combination, slice the roots into coins for dipping in hummus or for stir-fries.

**'WHITE SATIN'** (70 days). One of the most popular and widely available white carrots, 'White Satin' has smooth, slender roots that grow 7 to 9 inches long and are uniformly white throughout. Their flavor is mild but sweet; we like to roast these with a bit of honey or maple syrup for a tasty treat! These have been very popular with the kids, so I plant them in our winter cold frames, as well as in the spring and summer garden.

**'JAUNE OBTUSE DU DOUBS'** (70 days). This sunny yellow French heirloom will brighten up any carrot patch. The 6- to 8-inch-long roots are thick, sweet, and crisp with a strong carrot flavor. They taste great raw and are particularly appealing in salads or sliced with other veggies for dipping.

**'LUNAR WHITE'** (75 days). When I pulled the first few roots of 'Lunar White', my initial thought was that they looked like slender parsnips. They were 7 to 9 inches long with pale white skin and a matching white core. They have a mellow sweetness; we like them raw in salads, or roasted in the oven,



which enhances the sweet flavor. When grown under drought conditions, that core can get woody, so be sure to water weekly if there has been no rain.

**‘PURPLE HAZE’** (75 days). This All-America Selections winner is among the most popular of the colored carrots, yielding 8- to 10-inch-long deep purple roots with pumpkin orange interiors. They’re sweet, with a welcome crunch. Interestingly, the deepest color will come from roots grown in cool conditions — in the range of 60 to 68°F (15 to 20°C); we have good luck with our spring crop, but it’s our late-autumn harvest that gives us the darkest carrots. The roots will grow up to 12 inches long and have a 1½- to 2-inch shoulder. If boiled or added to soup or stew, the purple color will fade (and give cooked dishes a muddy purple hue), but ‘Purple Haze’ carrots are perfect for raw dishes or stir-fries.

**‘YELLOWSTONE’** (72 days). This is a Danvers-type carrot with 1- to 2-inch shoulders and medium-long roots that taper to a sharp point. They’ll get 7 to 8 inches long and have bright yellow skin with pale yellow flesh that is sweet with a mild earthiness. We love them grated with purple, red, and orange varieties, as well as a big handful of Italian parsley, for a daz-zling salad.

**‘RED SAMURAI’** (70 days). A Japanese variety, ‘Red Samurai’ yields long, slender roots with smooth, watermelon red skin and reddish pink flesh. They will usually grow 11 inches long, but in good soil, they can reach lengths of up to 14 inches. The unusual color is retained during cooking, but you can also eat them raw, enjoying their sweet-peppery flavor.



## growing great carrots

- > Carrots need a sunny site and deep, weed-free, stone-free soil with a fine, friable surface. If that doesn’t sound like your garden, consider building a raised bed. Dig in 2 to 3 inches of compost. Avoid high-nitrogen fertilizers, as excessive nitrogen will cause roots to fork or become hairy.
- > Sow seed 2 to 3 weeks before the last expected spring frost. Carrot seed is small, so take your time sowing to reduce the need to thin later on. Sow in shallow trenches, spacing the seeds every ½ inch and rows 8 to 10 inches apart. Cover lightly with soil (about ½ inch) and water the bed. Keep the soil evenly moist until the seeds germinate, which will take 1 to 2 weeks.
- > Once the seedlings are growing well, thin them to 2 inches apart. As the carrots grow, continue to thin by pulling every second root. This allows the remaining ones to thicken up. Don’t forget to eat the thinnings!
- > Irrigate weekly with a deep soaking to encourage steady growth, and pull any weeds that appear.
- > Succession plant by sowing fresh seed every 3 to 4 weeks. Our last planting is our winter crop, which we sow the first week of August — 10 to 12 weeks before the first expected fall frost.
- > Keep an eye out for pests like the carrot rust fly and slugs, which are drawn to carrot seedlings like a magnet. I use diatomaceous earth to discourage the slugs. Deer also love carrot greens, so protect your crop with a fence or barrier.
- > Mulch the soil with shredded leaves or straw to hold in soil moisture but also to prevent green shoulders.
- > To avoid breaking off carrot tops and leaving the roots stuck in the ground at harvest time, use a garden fork to loosen the earth before you start tugging on the tops.
- > Wait to harvest autumn carrots until cold weather has turned the starches in the roots to sugar. (Our kids call them “garden candy!”)
- > The tops of your homegrown carrots can be eaten raw or cooked. They have a bitter flavor, so we blanch them to temper the bitterness, and then stir-fry with a bit of garlic and olive oil.



# like beets?







# grow unusual varieties

Earthy, sweet, hand-staining beets offer a dual harvest of tender roots and fresh greens, which can be steamed, sautéed, or used to replace chard or spinach in your favorite dishes. ('Bull's Blood' is a red-leafed variety that makes a beautiful and tasty baby salad green.) However, most gardeners grow beets for their round red roots, which have a sweet, earthy flavor.

Red beets are a garden standard, but that doesn't mean it's not fun to experiment with the various unusual types of beets. From the pale colors and mild flavors of golden and white varieties, to the incredibly sweet sugar beets, to the ancient 'Red Crapaudine', there are some wonderful beets for adventurous gardeners to try.

## TRY THIS!

### Rustic, Flavorful 'Red Crapaudine'

**GIVEN ITS RUSTIC APPEARANCE**, you probably won't be surprised to learn that 'Red Crapaudine' is an ancient vegetable, often called "the oldest beet in cultivation." To be perfectly honest, it was that claim that

'Yellow  
Cylindrical'



first tempted me to grow this rare variety. Well, that and the fact that Leslie Land, former garden columnist for the *New York Times*, called it “a heritage variety that even looks pre-modern from its fat carrot shape to its rough, bark-like skin. Of all the many beets I’ve grown, ‘Red Crapaudine’ is the tastiest, dense fleshed and sweet, with just enough — i.e., only a little — of beet’s classic earthy taste.”

As Land notes, this unusual variety does form long, conical roots, much like a carrot, but the thick, rugged skin is almost black in color, similar to a black Spanish radish (see page 192), and the roots are rarely uniform in size or shape. Sometimes they’re forked, sometimes they’re tiny, but most grow to a usable size in around 3 months. They also don’t heave out of the soil, as some beets do, but typically remain buried.

The thick skin is a bit challenging to peel, but it does protect the sweet roots from all manner of weather, and they’re a good choice for cold-season harvesting, suited to deep mulching, cold frames, or hoop houses. We don’t bother peeling ‘Red Crapaudine’; we find it easier to roast the roots whole and then slide the skin off the deep red flesh.

The foliage is extremely ornamental: deep green with blood-red stems and veins.

In habit, the foliage grows more out than up, and the young leaves are nice when served raw in salads, while the mature foliage can be sautéed, steamed, or stir-fried.

## GROWING ‘RED CRAPAUDINE’

These beets have a longer growing season than most other varieties, needing up to 3 months to mature. They can be planted in early spring for a summer crop or in midsummer for a fall and winter crop. I grow them for the cold season, finding better root quality when they’re grown into autumn and harvested in cold weather. Yet no matter which season we have grown them, ‘Red Crapaudine’ roots are never woody or stringy.

Spotty germination rates are a common complaint, but this is likely due to inconsistent watering, as well as the fact that unlike most beet seeds, which are dried fruits with 2 to 4 seeds each, the fruits of ‘Red Crapaudine’ are single seeds. Direct sow in early spring, picking a sunny site with decent, well-drained soil. Raised beds are ideal. Work in a few inches of compost or aged manure and make shallow rows about 1 foot apart. Plant the seeds 1 inch apart, eventually thinning to a distance of 6 inches.

## LOOSEN, THEN PULL

When it’s time to harvest ‘Red Crapaudine’, use a pitchfork to loosen the soil around the plants before you try to pull them. The long roots hold tightly to the earth and don’t come out easily when tugged. This French heirloom is a long keeper that stores for months in a root cellar or cold storage.





'Red Crapaudine'  
roots are neither  
uniform nor  
comely, but their  
rich flavor and  
firm texture set  
them apart and  
have made them  
a coveted crop  
for foodies.



Sugar  
beet





# TRY THIS! Sugar Beets

**ME TO THE KIDS:** “We should plant sugar beets.”

Kids to me: “YES!”

I guess it’s not a surprise that kids would get excited about a vegetable with the word “sugar” in its name, and sugar beets are sweet — 16 to 20 percent of its weight comes from sucrose — but it still has the rugged, earthy flavor of the typical common beet. My main reason for growing sugar beets was so I could say “been there, done that” rather than hoping for a gourmet vegetable (which they’re not) or the idea of producing our own sugar. Who has time for that?

Sugar beets are certainly an interesting crop to try, though, and the roots can reach mammoth proportions, weighing 2 to 4 pounds each! They have an ice-cream cone shape with white skin and flesh. They do take a long time to reach maturity, needing up to 90 days from seeding. If you have a little extra space, why not give them a try?

## GROWING GREAT BIG SUGAR BEETS

Sow seeds 2 to 3 weeks before the last expected spring frost in a sunny site with fertile, well-drained soil. Before planting, loosen the soil to at least a foot to remove any clods of soil, rocks, or roots that could impede root growth; remember, sugar beets are big! Also, dig in a few inches of compost or aged manure.

Direct seed, spacing seeds 1 inch apart, thinning to a foot once the plants are a few inches tall. Giving them plenty of space will encourage large beets. Sugar beets

need regular, even soil moisture to grow high-quality roots. Give plants 1 to 2 inches of water per week, and mulch with shredded leaves or straw to conserve moisture.

Pull weeds as they appear.

Sugar beets are tolerant of cold weather and can be deep mulched with straw to extend the harvest into late autumn.

## MAKE YOUR OWN SUGAR SYRUP

Harvest by loosening the earth with a garden fork, then gently pulling the big roots out of the soil. We get a lot of oohs and aahs when each beet is lifted from the garden bed. But what to do with sugar beets?

We weren’t overly fond of the raw flavor of these beets, which can be grated and added to salads — it’s a funny sweet-earthy flavor — but they were pretty good roasted in the oven with other root vegetables. The eating quality doesn’t measure up to garden varieties, but we wanted to try and get as much out of these big beets as possible.

Making sugar is a time-consuming, fussy process, but making a sugar syrup is quite easy. Grate or thinly slice the roots, boiling them in a pot of water until the liquid thickens up. Strain and store in jars in the fridge. Use the liquid beet syrup as a sugar replacement in recipes, or add a dollop to iced tea, lemonade, tea, coffee, or cocktails.

The foliage of sugar beets is also edible, but it’s thicker and a bit stringier than the typical garden beet. However, their young leaves cook up fine and can be sautéed, steamed, or stir-fried.



## ‘Mammoth Red Mangel’

Sugar beets can grow quite large, but if you want to win a prize for biggest beet, I’d suggest you try growing ‘Mammoth Red Mangel’ (80 days). These monsters grow up to 2 feet long and can weigh in excess of 20 pounds! Obviously, they’re not prime eating, but they can be fed to chickens and other livestock. Really fun for the kids!



## TRY THIS! White and Golden Beets

**WHITE AND GOLDEN BEETS** have become very popular with gardeners as they discover their mellow sweetness and muted, nutty flavor. Plus, they don't stain your hands (and clothes and counters and dish towels) when you clean and cook them. Pick them young as baby beets, or allow them to reach maturity for roasting,

pickling, or boiling. If the roots of pale varieties heave out of the soil as they grow, their shoulders have a tendency green up. To remedy this, just shovel a bit of soil around the beets or mulch them with straw.

**'ALBINO'** (55 days). The round-rooted heirloom is quick to grow, ready just 8 weeks from seeding. The skin and flesh are a creamy white and have a sublime sweet flavor, popular even with folks who are not beet lovers. The bright green tops make excellent cooked greens.

**'BLANKOMA'** (55 days). This was the first white beet variety I tried in our gardens, and I was impressed. The seeds germinated quickly, and the plants grew well in



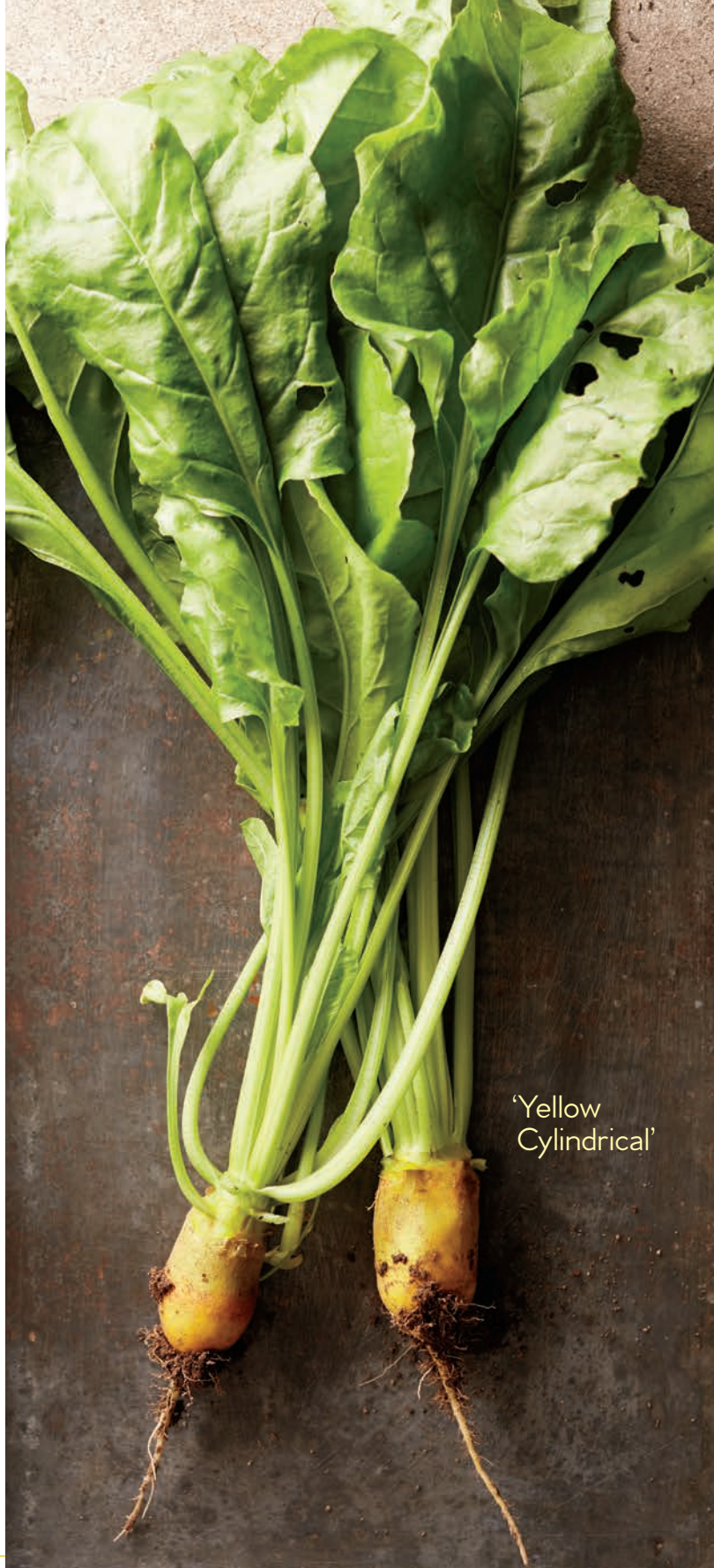
both spring and fall. The roots are round, slightly conical, and pure white inside and out. The tops are vigorous and delicious!

**'TOUCHSTONE GOLD'** (55 days). One of my favorite golden varieties, this beet has reddish gold skin and a sunny yellow interior. Expect uniform roots, good germination, and vigorous green tops. Pick as a baby beet when the roots are just 1½ inches across, or let them grow to their mature size of 3 inches.

**'BOLDOR'** (51 days). Very quick to mature, 'Boldor' is a hybrid beet with reddish yellow skin and bright gold flesh. It's extremely consistent, producing uniform 2- to 3-inch diameter roots with an outstanding sweet flavor. Great for juicing.

**'GOLDEN'** (55 days). Here is a reliable heirloom with lemon yellow flesh and rose-gold skin. Like other golden varieties, it has a sweet beet flavor, but the beets can get really big. We tend to pick these about 2 months from seeding when they are 2 to 4 inches across, but we've had a few that were 6 inches in diameter! With a little extra soil preparation, good weather, and a dose of luck, 'Golden' has the potential to produce giant-size roots.

**'YELLOW CYLINDRICAL'** (60 days). My mother is partial to cylindrical-shaped beets, which slice so nicely after roasting or boiling. We've grown the red variety 'Cylindra Formanova' for years, so when I noticed 'Yellow Cylindrical' listed in a seed catalog, I was anxious to give it a try. It's a mangel-type beet that is used primarily for animal feed, but that's when it's allowed to mature. We pick the oblong roots young and enjoy the bright gold skin and white flesh in our favorite beet recipes.



'Yellow Cylindrical'