

PARSNIP

Gardening tips provided by
Jefferson Farm & Gardens



Overview

Parsnip, *Pastinaca sativa*, is a cool season vegetable and is related to parsley, carrots, dill, and celery. In the 19th century, the potato replaced the parsnip as the main dietary source of starch in Europe and America. The parsnip is good source of potassium and dietary fiber.

Choosing Varieties

There are a few varieties of parsnips that vary in size, disease resistance, and days until maturity. Recommended varieties for Missouri and other Midwest states are:

- Hollow Crown (sweet, old standard)
- Javelin (canker resistant, vigorous)
- Lancer (canker resistant, long slim roots)

It is recommended to try a few varieties to determine overall plant performance and personal preference.

Planting Tips

The parsnip has a long growing season and needs a frost in the fall to sweeten its root. Like carrots, parsnips need good soil drainage and at least 8-9 inches of loosened fine soil for formation of high-quality roots, which can be accomplished by planting in raised beds or rows. Addition of a significant amount of sand or compost can improve formation of the parsnip root.

The life of parsnip seeds is short, so fresh seed should be used each year. In Missouri, seeds can be sown in early April. Seeds should be planted no more than a ½ inch deep in rows about 18 inches apart or 8-10 inches apart in a bed. Even if fresh seed is used, germination can be poor, so to achieve an even stand the rows should be seeded thickly.

Since parsnip seeds take about 3-4 weeks to germinate, radish seeds can be spaced throughout the row as a marker and can help break through crusted soil. The radishes should be removed once the parsnips have emerged. Another way to overcome crusted soil is to mulch the row with sawdust or grass clippings after planting and to keep the row moist until germination.

Once the plants are 4-6 inches tall, they should be thinned

for a final spacing of about 4 inches. Sowing instructions for a particular variety can usually be found on the seed packet.

Soil Fertility and Pest Control

Parsnips should be planted in well-drained, loose soils without stones and other debris and would benefit from the addition of nutrients either in the form of a complete fertilizer or aged compost. Parsnips would benefit from a thorough watering once a week during an extended dry spell. Young parsnip plants should be kept weed-free and monitored for swallowtail-butterfly caterpillar feeding. Handpicking the caterpillars from leaves usually supplies sufficient control.

Parsnip canker occurs on parsnip crowns as a black, purple, or brown/orange rot during a drought or on a damaged crown. To prevent canker, improve soil drainage, rotate parsnips with other crops, and plant resistant varieties.

Harvesting

Parsnips should remain in the ground until after a freeze in late fall. Roots may be harvested or stored in the garden if covered by a layer of straw mulch until needed. They can be stored in the garden until the next spring but should be harvested before new growth occurs. Parsnips can be dug with a fork and then stored in plastic bags in the refrigerator for several weeks. Sap from the leaves and stems can cause an allergic reaction, so care should be taken when handling the parsnips.

Seed Sources

Seeds can be ordered from mail order companies via phone or website. Johnny's Selected Seeds (1-877-564-6697, johnnyseeds.com) and Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds (1-417-924-8917, rareseeds.com) are two companies that sell parsnip varieties.

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