

RUTABAGA

Gardening tips provided by
Jefferson Farm & Gardens



Overview

The rutabaga, *Brassica napusi* var. *napobrassica*, is a cool season vegetable and is closely related to the turnip. Both the rutabaga and turnip are grown for their roots as well as their greens, but the rutabaga root is larger, has smooth, waxy leaves, and takes longer to develop than turnips. Rutabagas are a good source of vitamin A.

Choosing Varieties

There are a few varieties of rutabagas available that differ in days till maturity, root size, color, and cold tolerance, as well as other traits. A few recommended varieties for Missouri and other Midwest states are:

- American Purple Top (sweet, yellow flesh)
- Burpee's Top Purple (orange when cooked)
- Laurentain (uniform roots)

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

Planting Tips

The rutabaga is a cool season vegetable that is able to survive a freeze but cannot tolerate heat. They can be spring or fall planted, but perform better as a fall crop. A frost actually improves the quality of the root, sweetening its flavor.

In Missouri, seeds can be sown as early as mid-March in the spring or can be planted in mid-June to early July for a fall crop. They should be planted no more than ½ inch deep in rows that are about 2 feet apart. Once the plants are 2-3 inches tall, they should be thinned for a final spacing of about 6 inches. The thinned seedlings can be used for greens. Sowing instructions for a particular variety can usually be found on the seed packet.

Soil Fertility and Pest Control

Rutabaga seeds should be planted in well-drained soils and would benefit from the addition of nutrients either in the form of a complete fertilizer or aged compost.

To prevent weeds, retain moisture, and to keep soil temperatures down, mulch can be applied around the plants.

Rutabaga plants should receive enough water to keep them vigorously growing without waterlogging the soil.

Cabbage worms are a common pest of rutabagas. If the population of small green caterpillars is too numerous to hand pick, an insecticide with Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis*) can be used such as Dipel and Thuricide (be sure to follow product labels).

Flea beetles are pests to rutabagas by eating holes in the young leaves, slowing growth. Flea beetles can be controlled with chemicals containing the organic compound pyrethrin.

To prevent diseases like clubroot and black rot, be sure to rotate members of the *Brassica* genus with other crops each year.

Harvesting

Rutabagas can be pulled after the root has reached 2 inches in diameter, but are usually harvested once they reach 5-6 inches in diameter. If they are left in the ground beyond maturity, they can become tough and woody. Young tops can be eaten, and the skin of the rutabaga should be peeled, and then it can be prepared like a potato.

Seed Sources

Seeds can be ordered from mail order companies via phone or website. Reimer Seeds (www.reimerseeds.com) and Burpee Seeds (1-800-888-1447, burpee.com) are two companies that sell rutabaga varieties.

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