

TURNIP

Gardening tips provided by
Jefferson Farm & Gardens

Overview

The turnip, *Brassica rapa*, is a cool season vegetable and is closely related to the rutabaga. Both the turnip and rutabaga are grown for their roots as well as their greens. In Ireland, turnips were hollowed out and small embers were placed inside to ward off evil spirits, becoming the first jack-o-lanterns.

Choosing Varieties

There are a few varieties of turnips available that differ in days till maturity, root size, color, and cold tolerance, as well as other traits. Some turnip varieties are grown for their roots, while others are strictly grown for their greens. A few recommended varieties for Missouri and other Mid-west states are:

- Golden Ball (sweet, yellow flesh)
- Purple Top White Globe (heavy yielder)
- Seven Top (used for greens)
- Tokyo Cross (virus resistant)

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

Planting Tips

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

In Missouri, seeds can be sown in late March for a spring crop or in the late summer for a fall crop and are typically planted in mid-July to early August. They should be planted no more than ½ inch deep in rows that are about 1 foot apart. Once the plants are 3-4 inches tall, they should be thinned for a final spacing of about 4 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

Turnip 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 tem-



peratures down, mulch can be applied around the plants. Turnip plants should receive enough moisture to keep them vigorously growing without waterlogging the soil.

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

Flea beetles are pests to turnips 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.

Harvesting

Turnip greens can be harvested when the leaves are 4 to 6 inches in length. If they are cut just above ground level, a new crop of greens will grow. Turnips grown for the root can be pulled after the root has reached 2-3 inches in diameter. The leaves can be eaten as well. If they are left in the ground beyond maturity, they can become tough and woody with a poor flavor.

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 Reimer Seeds (www.reimerseeds.com) are two companies that sell turnip varieties.