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Beets, by Lawrence Davis-Hollander, ©2015

Growing up eating my mother's Borscht from a jar may have ruined my budding love for beets – I must confess, they are not my favorite vegetable. In fact, I found them most palatable when served with liberal amounts of sour cream, which turned the vivid magenta-purple broth into an oddly colored pink pool.

But beets are a wonderful vegetable: They are easy to grow, the greens and roots are edible and delicious, and they keep for months in the refrigerator or root cellar.

Today, I don't mind roasted beets – especially when they are part of a mixture of roasted parsnips, potatoes and carrots – and I like them shredded raw in a [green salad](#). Every few years I preserve some [pickled beets](#), but most of the crop languishes in the jar. I do love steamed beet greens with a bit of olive oil and garlic, better than chard any day.

Cultivated beets (*Beta vulgaris* subsp. *vulgaris*) are members of Chenopodiaceae, the goosefoot family. Botanists have recently started including the Chenopodiaceae in the Amaranthaceae.

Origins

The genus *Beta* comprises four sections – *Beta* or *Vulgares*, *Corollinae*, *Nanae* and *Procumbentes* – totaling 12 species. Beets are part of a group of closely related plants that includes chard, table beets, sugar beets and fodder beets. The wild ancestors of beets originated around the regions of the Mediterranean and Black Sea. These plants were largely perennials, but at some point they became biennials, possibly as they were domesticated and moved into more northern areas.

The wild plants did not produce the swollen root we know as beets, rather they produced only chardlike leaves. Leaf beets were extensively cultivated in ancient times by the Assyrians, Greeks and Romans. Precisely when and how beet roots were developed is unclear. They do not seem to be ancient, and the first evidence for them comes from 16th-century herbal texts. Theories vary as to whether the roots were first developed around the Mediterranean and moved northward, or if northern farmers developed the roots as a mechanism for overwintering the plant and as a storage crop.

One of the characteristics of beets is the obvious coloration of roots, stems and leaves caused by betalain pigments that can turn them white, yellow, pink or red.

In Europe, from the late Renaissance on, the development of table beets quickly gave rise to a variety of forms after interbreeding with leafy beets. From crosses of leaf beets with table beets came the fodder beet or mangel, an abbreviation of the German word *mangelwurzel*. Their roots can weigh up to 20 pounds. Larger mangels are better suited to animal feed, while small and immature mangels can be quite tasty.

Sugar beets were developed in France during the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815) after a blockade by England narrowed Great Britain's control of the tropical sugar trade. An alternative explanation indicates the French simply did not want to be dependent upon sugar trade from Britain's tropical colonies and began breeding efforts. Developed from the White Silesian fodder beet, the sugar beet now contributes 20 percent of worldwide sugar production.

Growing and Varieties

[Many beets](#) available today are open-pollinated and classified as heirloom since there has been little complex breeding work done with beets. [They tend to grow well](#) in a wide variety of climates and conditions while performing best in good soils.

Beet seed is actually a cluster or aggregate of several deceased pollinated flowers known as a multigerm. Each cluster may contain one to five seeds. Because a portion of the beet grows above soil level, the skin color changes, and a corky brownish outer layer develops. The underground portion of the skin is relatively smooth and darker than the interior color.

One of the oldest varieties still available is Early Blood Turnip, which dates to around 1800, if not earlier. This beet produces medium to deep purple-red rounded tapering roots, with a lighter interior characterized by concentric pinkish rings or zones. The variety is variable in root size, and they do not mature evenly, which is more than likely why they fell into disuse. They were featured in seed catalogs throughout the 19th century under a wide variety of names and selections. They are an excellent all-around beet. Seeds are difficult to find, but several small companies still carry them.

Around 1890, Mr. Reeves from Port Hope, Ontario, Canada, selected a variety of Early Blood Turnip that was decidedly more uniform than its predecessor. After further selection and improvement, it was released in 1892 by D.M. Ferry as Detroit Dark Red Turnip. Later 'turnip' was dropped from its epithet.

It is one of the most widely available heirloom beets today. It has a deeper skin tone, a rounder shape and strong tops, and it generally matures earlier than the Blood Turnip. Like its predecessor, the Detroit Dark Red has zonal coloration in cross section that varies in intensity with planting and harvest time. The roots range from 2 to 3 inches across. It is still considered one of the best varieties for both the fresh markets and for commercial processing.

Early Wonder is a midseason, dark purple beet with almost white zonation in the root, and fewer concentric rings than previous types. Young roots are oval, becoming more round with age. It was first released by Woodruff and Sons in 1911 after being bred from Crosby's Early Egyptian. Early Wonder is not as popular for canning because it can lose color, though it is an excellent storage and eating beet.

Crosby's Early Egyptian has some similarities, but the roots are more flat and pointed. It was developed by Josiah Crosby from Arlington, Massachusetts, and was first released in 1885 by James J.H. Gregory & Sons of Marblehead, Massachusetts.

Two to 3 inches in diameter, the roots are medium to dark purple-red with somewhat pronounced zonation. While uncommon, seeds can still be obtained from several companies.

The flatter characteristic comes from the Flat of Egypt variety, which was introduced around 1868 from Germany, becoming prevalent by 1872. These beets were early, thus ideal for forcing in greenhouses, and they made an attractive bunching variety.

Roots are deep purple-red, almost heart-shaped, prominent zonation when seen in cross sections, 2 to 3 inches across, and fairly flat. They were supplanted by the Crosby's variety partly because Flat of Egypt beets have a much rougher skin, although the variety continued to be offered by many seed companies well into the 20th century. Seed for this beet is uncommon, but available. The examples I have seen are not very flat, and don't conform to the original type.

Bassano, or Early Bassano, is most commonly known today as Chiogga. It is considered to be one of the earliest maturing beets. It is irregular in shape, rounded and somewhat flattened. The skin is a light to medium red, and its flashy interior stands out – part of what makes this beet popular. The interior striping has wide bands of light to dark rose alternating with white, which gives it the nickname of the Candy Stripe beet. The flavor is good.

Introduced to this country just prior to 1840, Bassano is considerably older and comes from Italy, perhaps via France. This beet was a well-known market variety in Italy and was offered for sale in the regions between Venice and Genoa; the city and commune of Bassano del Grappa is located in northeastern Italy. Modern roots don't seem to be as flattened as the original type.

While heirloom beets come in white, pink and orange or yellow, they are largely absent from commercial seed catalogs. A number of [yellow beet varieties](#) are available, and only Burpee's Golden can be called heirloom. Introduced in the 1940s, this variety produces relatively round 2-inch beets with a somewhat sweeter and more delicate taste than the earthier red beets. Similar yellow beets were known in the 19th century. Germination tends to be lower with this variety, so it needs to be sown more thickly. White open-pollinated beets are available as well, including sugar beets, but these are not heirloom varieties.

If you have eaten red beets, it is likely you have already consumed some heirloom varieties and just didn't know it.

A whole world of heirloom beets exists, including a few I didn't mention. They are well-suited to small-scale and backyard gardening, so expand your horizons with some new old roots.