

<http://www.grit.com/farm-and-garden/vegetables/heirloom-seeds-for-cultivated-carrots-zm0z13sozgou.aspx>

Carrots, by Lawrence Davis-Hollander, ©2015

Deep in the high, green valleys of western and central Asia, and surrounded by snow-capped peaks, you will find the carrot's area of origin. This region is known as the Iranian plateau, a variable and often rugged topography stretching from northern Iran to Pakistan.

The carrot (*Daucus carota*) is a member of the umbel family, otherwise known as the Apiaceae, or Umbelliferae, family. The name "umbel" comes from the flower heads, with the stalks being properly known as pedicels, which originate from a common point and spread out like an umbrella. The name appears to derive from the Latin, *umbrella*, or a parasol, which itself comes from *umbra* or *umbraticus*, meaning shade or shadow.

Carrots are considered biennials, and while the cultivated types we grow are true biennials, blooming the second year after a cold period, some of the more primitive carrots, such as landraces from Afghanistan, have a percentage of plants that bloom the first year.

Apiaceae is a large plant family yielding many vegetables and seasonings, along with some of the most deadly poisons. Carrots and parsnips are the well-known roots in this family, along with the vegetables celery and Florence fennel, and herbs and spices such as parsley, dill, fennel, lovage, cumin, coriander, chervil, caraway, anise and asafoetida. The fruits of this family are known as schizocarps, each of which splits upon maturity into two mericarps. The mericarps are what [we sow as seeds](#).

Many of the [seeds of this family](#), as well as the leaves, are aromatic and contain essential oils. Poisonous relatives of this family include poison hemlock (*Conium maculatum*) and water hemlock (*Cicuta* spp.), whose toxicity is comparable to arsenic while an eighth as lethal as cyanide. A number of umbel plants, including some forms of wild carrot, contain coumarin, an important anticoagulant medicine also used as a rodenticide.

History of Carrot Domestication

While the botanical origin of the carrot seems fairly clear, its history of domestication and introduction of various colors are more controversial due to a lack of clear documentation and genetic information.

We believe wild carrots were first used about 5,000 years ago, based on the seed remains found at prehistoric sites. This definitely points to seed usage, yet it's a matter of speculation if the roots were actually consumed. It seems likely they were, simply because indigenous people were pretty smart; wild roots, however, don't make the best meal. Their roots were white, as are all wild carrots, and the vegetable spread around the Old World fairly easily.

[Carrots began to be domesticated](#), cultivated and stored in their area of origin around 900 A.D., a rather late date. While later historical documents from this region tell us they would have been purple and yellow, where these color selections came from is not clear. These colors also appeared in Mediterranean Europe and China around 1300. Landraces collected in Afghanistan during the 20th century are red, yellow and purple.

A fair body of linguistic and illustrative evidence points to usage and presumably domestication earlier in both Hellenistic and Roman times. Pliny the Elder, a Roman naturalist, and Galen, a Greek physician, refer to cultivated carrots. Dioscorides mentions what seems to be a carrot, and an illustration is certainly that of a carrot. However, the orange color is misleading, since orange carrots didn't appear until approximately 1500, first in Spain and later in Holland and other parts of northern Europe. Orange carrots were unknowingly selected from yellow types for two genes that accumulated more carotene, making the root orange.

White domesticated carrots were known by the 1600s in Europe and became one of the main colors. If there were domesticated carrots in southern Europe 2,000 years ago, where did these varieties come from? Central Asia, from some type of wild carrot no longer found in Europe, or from elsewhere?

The wild carrot of North America, Queen Anne's lace, was likely introduced to the region in colonial times, as it is virtually identical to the European wild carrot. Speculation abounded that this carrot may have been a wild species carried over by wanderers from Asia, or possibly an escaped cultivated variety. Because all carrots cross-pollinate easily via many insects, including flies and bees, saving seed from the carrots you grow can be a bit tricky unless you cage your carrots.

Varieties of Carrots to Try

The eating of fresh carrots is a relatively new phenomenon. Most carrots were cooked or used for animal fodder, so the fresh taste was not as critical to consumers as it is today. If you have ever eaten any of the white, purple or yellow varieties — heirloom or newly developed — you'll notice their taste isn't amazing. While I think heirloom orange carrots are pretty good, some of them have a bit more of what I would describe as a wild flavor.

One of the oldest varieties of carrot still available today, though rare, is Early Scarlet Horn or Dutch Horn. A relatively short, 5- to 6-inch carrot, Early Scarlet Horn is chunky and blunt tipped, also referred to as stump rooted. They do well in heavy soils. Early Horn was known by the 1740s, possibly much earlier, and was probably one of several varieties originating in Hoorn, in the Netherlands. Bernard McMahon offered seed of this variety by 1810, and the Shakers cultivated it. As the name suggests, it ripens early, and the quality is fairly good.

Oxheart is bigger and broader than Early Horn, with carrots up to 1 pound in weight. It was developed in the vicinity of Nantes, France, and was known as Guerrande. This variety is pleasant eating and makes a better cooking carrot.

Chantenay, or Red Core Chantenay, is one of the more readily available heirloom carrots, and was developed by the late 1870s. It has a distinct red core, blunt tip, very good taste, is about 6 to

7 inches in length, and does well in heavy soils. By 1900, more than 70 seed catalogs in the United States carried this variety.

Saint Valery is a longer carrot, about 10 to 12 inches in length, which is considered an intermediate type, and it was introduced around 1880. According to Vilmorin, the French seedsman, it had been cultivated in the vicinity of Saint Valery for a “long time.” It has good flavor and quality. What is available today is somewhat variable and may be virtually identical to Long Red Surrey. In fact, several seed sources list them as synonymous when quite clearly they were not originally. According to author William Woys Weaver, James Scarlet Intermediate may also fall in this indistinguishable carrot jumble. These latter two carrots are available from a number of English suppliers, and Saint Valery is now offered in a variety of seed catalogs.

One of the more esteemed American carrots is the Danvers Half Long, a blocky, 6- to 7-inch carrot with deep orange flesh. This variety originated from growers near Danvers, Massachusetts, who had probably been growing or developing it since the 1840s. It was supposedly more pointed at first, and growers selected it for the more stump-rooted form for easier harvesting in heavy soils. It was first listed in 1871 by Schlegel, Everett and Co. in Boston. Not as common as it once was, it is available from a number of different catalogs.

While the colorful carrot varieties that are available today are not heirlooms, breeders have incorporated some of the genes of landraces from disparate places, such as Turkey and China, to create new varieties. It’s not always clear which are hybrids and which are open-pollinated, and that’s probably on purpose. In any case, you’ll get tastes of some of the oldest germplasm, even if they are recombined. Personally, I think orange carrots still taste the best.

Nowadays, much of the breeding effort with carrots is to produce sweeter and higher carotene content, making them more nutritious than their heirloom counterparts. Yet, there are many worthy heirlooms that are all-around great crops. Try some next season.