

## **Turnips, by Lawrence Davis-Hollander, ©2015**

For millennia, the turnip was one of the most popular vegetables out there, and for good reason. While potatoes have more or less cornered the market in the last hundred years, the delightful turnip's versatility, hardiness and nutritional value are worthy of consideration.

Turnips are a member of the Brassicaceae family, a fairly large group populated by many well-known edible plants including mustard, cabbage, kale, broccoli, Chinese cabbage, Brussels sprouts, rutabaga, radish and canola (rapeseed) in addition to flowers such as alyssum, stocks and wallflowers.

There are many “groups” or variations within the Brassica genus, a fact that makes their classification confusing even to botanists. If you are saving seed from any of these species, make sure you know what plants will cross-pollinate and take care to keep them separated.

Turnips, *Brassica rapa* var. *rapa* (sometimes known as *B. Campestris*), include many closely related varieties that are cultivated primarily for the leaves, although their roots are prized in traditional Japanese cuisine. Other *Brassica rapa* members include *B. rapa* var. *chinensis* — pak choi, bok choi, tatsoi and others — and celery cabbage, known in this country as napa cabbage, *B. rapa* var. *pekinensis*. In addition to being cultivated as vegetables, specialty turnips are raised for animal fodder and oil seed.

Turnips can form swollen, rounded, somewhat flattened, or long, cylindrical taproots, with compound (indented) hairy leaves. A true biennial, the turnip requires a vernalization, or cooling period, before producing blooms and seeds in its second year. It's uncommon that humans consume an entire plant, but these are one of the few, with both roots and greens finding homes in dishes all over the world.

### **Turnip Variety Origins**

Turnips originated in the Mediterranean region and spread to the Middle East and western Asia, with European cultivation predating the Middle Ages. They still grow wild in parts of eastern Europe and western Russia. First described by Theophrastus in 400 B.C. and later by Pliny in 100 B.C., turnip cultivation was well established in Greek and Roman times and likely predates these civilizations. Ancient writers indicate that folks living in the country, particularly the poor, often utilized this vegetable.

Turnips were first cultivated in Colonial America in 1622 and were widely consumed throughout the 18th century. By 1750, the new lands south of Boston reputedly grew the best turnips, and this tradition carries on today near Cape Cod in the cultivation of the Eastham Turnip, which is actually a white rutabaga.

In 1810, Philadelphia seedsman Bernard McMahon listed the availability of Early Dutch, Early Stone, Early Green, Yellow Turnip, Large Red, Large Tankard, Large Norfolk Field and White Round. Later 19th-century seed catalogs listed more than 40 varieties. Maule's 1902 seed catalog included Aberdeen, Goldenball, Southern 7 Top, Extra Early Purple Top Milan, Early White Flat Dutch, Red Top Strap Leaf, Scarlet Kashmir and Late White Norfolk. Turnips could be round, flat, or long cylindrical with white or yellow flesh.

Turnips also are known as “neeps,” derived from the Latin word *napus* and the Old English *naep*. *Neep* is still used in Scotland, although the word often describes rutabagas and the dish haggis and neeps.

The “turn” portion of the vegetable's name may owe its origin to the association with turning on a lathe and roundness, dating to the 13th century. Another “neep” is the parsnip, unrelated to the turnip. In Italian, a little turnip can be a *raviolo*, while many of them would be *ravioli*. The term derives from the word *rava*, or the Latin *rapa* for turnip, and perhaps more properly refers to the turnip's cousin, the rutabaga.

## **Turnip Cultivation**

Turnips are truly one of the easiest vegetables to grow. If planted in fertile, consistently moist soil, they grow fairly rapidly, producing “baby” turnips in five weeks or less and full-sized turnips in two months. Soils subject to drying out will interrupt growth and produce inferior turnips.

Depending on your climate, turnips can be direct-sown from early spring to late summer, but they grow most rapidly during cool periods. In areas with hot summers, they are best sown in March or April. Fall-harvested turnips should be seeded from about mid-July to the end of August.

Turnips can remain unprotected before the ground freezes. In milder climates, they can be left in the ground during the winter and, with additional protection, can sometimes over-winter as far north as Zone 5. While subject to a wide range of diseases and some insect predation, turnips generally require very little care. Don't want to take the chance on them freezing or being consumed by rodents? They store well in a damp root cellar and will keep in the refrigerator for months.

Turnips are an excellent source of nutrients including vitamin C as well as vitamin B6, calcium and other minerals. The greens are especially rich in nutrients.

The slight bitterness associated with these plants comes from glucosinolates, a naturally occurring class of organic compounds that can be toxic and are associated with antithyroid activity in some individuals. Most people would have to eat a vast quantity of turnips to produce any ill effects. These compounds help prevent insect predation; however, many insects have evolved along with these plants and have developed mechanisms that render these chemicals nontoxic to them.

## **Turnip Varieties**

One of the most recognized heirloom varieties is the Purple Top White Globe. It is rounded in shape, with purple above, white below and white flesh. Large specimens can grow up to 6 inches in diameter. This plant has remained fairly unchanged since 1880, when it also was known as Red Top White Globe and considered an improvement over flat types such as Purple Top Milan and the “strap-leaved” varieties. While sweet, the flavor has a hint of bitterness, which is caused by this variety’s higher concentrations of glucosinolates.

The White Egg Turnip was introduced around 1880. Contemporary illustrations indicate a more or less egg-shaped root, considerably longer than it is wide.

Today, the variety has a slightly flattened round shape, but its pure white skin and flesh are still reminiscent of an egg. It is a rapid grower, with baby turnips appearing in about five weeks and reaching maturity in about seven weeks.

In the late 19th century, it was considered one of the best bunching turnips for market, and it still holds that status today. When quickly cooked in the steamer, this variety’s sweet taste does not require any amendments. White Egg Turnips are tender enough to eat raw.

Orange Jelly or Golden Ball is a round turnip with yellow skin belowground and a greenish tint where exposed. It has pale yellow flesh that is tasty, with a pleasant dose of turnip bitterness, though it is not as fine-grained as White Egg. The roots may reach 3 or 4 inches across and weigh a half-pound or more. In 1855, an English company distributed it to the U.S. Patent Office as Robertson’s Golden Ball for trialing.

While turnips have lost some of their status over the centuries, there is little doubt they are one of the healthiest vegetables we can add to our diet. Their simplicity of growth, good yields, nutritional properties, hardiness and long storage ability make them an ideal garden crop. The latter part of the summer is an ideal time to think turnips. So turn up some turnips!