

Table Beets



Table beets, grown for its wonderful and sweet root, are a minor crop in Yuma County and acreage is very small. In 2009, the US produced beets on roughly 7,000 acres.

Table beets have more natural sugar than any other vegetable...even carrots and sweet corn.

Sugar beets are related to table beets, but sugar beets are rarely eaten. Instead, they're used to create about a third of the world's supply of table sugar! A fully grown sugar beet is about a foot long and can weigh up to five pounds.

Beets are fat-free and low in calories, and they have lots of fiber and vitamin C. Beets can be eaten raw, boiled, steamed, roasted, baked, and pickled.

Leafy green beet tops are a good source of vitamins A and C, plus calcium and fiber. An easy way to cook beets is to bake them like you would a potato. Choose smaller beets, wash them and trim the tops down to 1 inch, then wrap each beet separately in foil. Bake for about an hour, or until the beets are tender when poked with a fork. To remove the skins of cooked beets, rub a paper towel against the skin (wear disposable gloves when you do this unless you want purple hands). The skins will slide right off.

Most beets are dark purple outside with red flesh inside, but there are varieties with white and golden-yellow flesh too. Beets will often "bleed" and stain, hands, clothes and kitchen counter tops, so be careful when cooking them. You can reduce bleeding by leaving at least 1 inch of stem when you cut off the leafy green tops.

Borscht is a traditional Russian and Polish soup made from fresh beets. It can be served hot or cold.

Thanks to their red color, pulverized beets are often used to label fresh cuts of beef and to turn regular lemonade into "pink lemonade." People in the 1800s called table beets "blood turnips" because of their dark red juice. The red pigment in beetroot - betaline is used as a natural food coloring for a wide range of foods, including frozen pizzas, tomato paste and strawberry ice cream.

Beets have been around for thousands of years — the ancient Greek physician Hippocrates used beet leaves as bandages around 400BC.

Table Beets, *Beta vulgaris*, are a native of South Europe, extensively cultivated as an article of food and especially for the production of sugar, and presents many varieties.

In old wise tales, the juice of the Red Beetroot was recommended as a remedy for jaundice, and the juice put into ones nostrils, was intended to provide from ringing in the ears and toothaches.

Beets are low in calories and are a good source of vitamin C. A medium sized root has only 50 calories, no fat, and supplies 4% of the daily vitamin C requirement. Beet tops (greens) are an excellent source of vitamin A and provide more minerals and vitamins than the root.

The majority of table beets is produced for processing, while only a small portion of the production is dedicated for fresh market.

Table beet is a member of a complex of crop plants from the genus *Beta*. This complex includes members domesticated for their use as root crops, leaf and petiole crops (leaf beet, swiss chard, table beet), animal feed (fodder beet), and a source of sucrose (sugar beet). The development of these diverse crops from the common table beet illustrates the power of artificial selection and human creativity in crop development.

The table beet has been cultivated for thousands of years as both a root and leaf vegetable crop. Its origins as a cultivated crop trace back to the development of a leaf vegetable by the Romans from wild species of *Beta* growing in the Mediterranean region. During this period, or perhaps as this leaf crop moved northward in Europe, selection for swollen-rooted forms resulted in the development of the modern table beet.

Table beets are grown and consumed worldwide as both a fresh and processed vegetable, but are most popular in Eastern Europe, Asia, the Mediterranean region, and the United States. Compared to most United States vegetable crops, the area of table beet grown each year is low, and generally this does not exceed 10,000 acres in the United States, nearly half of which is in Wisconsin. This area does not include baby leaf production in the California and Yuma, which has gained in prominence in the past decade.

The two most recognizable characteristics of the table beet are (1) the presence of deep red pigments, which color roots and foliage red, pink, orange, yellow, and (2) the earthy flavor of the root. Although table beet cultivars were introduced into the United States with the early settlers in the seventeenth century, little improvement other than a few attempts at inbreeding were conducted in the United States until the second half of the twentieth century.

Currently table beet breeders are developing modern quality traits such as improved root color, different root shapes, better root flavor, and now, leaf and stem (petiole) shape have become important selection criteria, primarily for the baby leaf salad industry.

The traditional use of the table beet as a cooked root vegetable is no longer the only way consumers eat this crop. In recent years, there has been an increase in production of table beets for the use of their leaves in premixed bagged salads. Salad mix ingredients must have a shelf life of at least 1 week and add a desirable feature to the mix such as leaf shape, color, or appearance (smooth or crinkled). Beet leaves have excellent shelf life and their brilliant red petioles (leaf stems) which contrast with the bright green young leaves is very attractive.

Kurt Nolte is an area agriculture agent with the Yuma County Cooperative Extension. He can be reached at 928-726-3904.