



# BEETS TALKING POINTS

## 2. A Slice of Beet History

- **The wild beet is believed to have descended from the seabed (*Beta maritima*) and originated in the Mediterranean.** It has been cultivated since about the third century.
- Romans were some of the first to cultivate and develop beets for their roots and used them to feed animals. Greeks were the first to consume both roots and leaves.
- The leaves were used for medicinal purposes, and then later as a potherb (a plant whose leaves, stems, or flowers are cooked and eaten, or used as seasoning).
- The sugar beet (or “white beet”) was developed in the 18th century and, in the early 1800s, the French began extracting the sugar.
- **Colonists brought red and sugar beets to America in the 19th century.**

## 3. How Do Beets Grow?

- **Beets are a cool-season**, herbaceous plant grown either as an annual or biennial **crop**. Most varieties are frost-hardy, but cannot endure extreme heat. In California, the first plantings occur in March and continue until late June.
- Beets prefer deep, well-drained soils and have a large root system that extends down to three feet or more. Depending on use, they are generally picked in 40 to 60 days (small, table beets), 60 to 70 days (round, cooking beets), or 70 to 80 days (processing beets) after planting.
- **Growing beets adds minerals to the soil**, as the leaves are made up of 25% magnesium, which is great for compost piles. Beets do well when planted with onions, cooking greens (kohlraabi), radishes, turnips, and garlic. Plant beets where legumes previously grew (except runner or pole beans) because the soil is rich in nitrogen that beets need to grow.
- **Beets are a root vegetable** of the Chenopodiace, or Goosefoot family. The *Beta vulgaris* species includes beets (table beets, processing beets, and novelty beets), chard, mangel-wurzels, and sugar beets. Beets contain a pigment called *betacyanin* that gives them their deep, red color. The beet, like its cousin the turnip, is known for its edible leaves and roots.
- Chard varieties include Swiss chard, leaf beet, spinach beet, silver beet, seakale beet, and white beet. Chard produces broad leaves rather than a large round root, and only the leaves are edible.
- **Sugar beets** contain a natural sugar called *sucrose* and contain twice the amount of sugar as table beets. They provide about **one-third of the world’s table sugar supply**.

## 4. What season do we pick Beets?

- In South Dakota gardens, red or golden beets can be planted in spring and harvested in late spring, with an additional planting and harvest in the fall. In the Dakotas, sugar beets are usually planted and harvested in the fall.
- California grown beets are available year round.

## 5. Why should we eat Beets?

- A ½ cup of cooked or raw beets is a good source of **folate** and **manganese**.
- **Folate** (also known as folic acid) is used to **make red blood cells**.
- **Manganese** is good for **bone development** and plays an important part in an enzyme that helps remove harmful oxidants from the body.
- A ½ cup of cooked beet greens is an excellent source of **vitamin K (heals cuts)**, **vitamin A (healthy eyes)**, and **vitamin C (immune system booster)**.
- It is also a good source of **riboflavin**. Riboflavin is also called vitamin B<sub>2</sub>. It is important for building **healthy red blood cells**.
  - Riboflavin is a water-soluble vitamin, which means it is not stored in the body.
  - Riboflavin works with other B-vitamins to help your body grow and release energy from the carbohydrates you eat.
  - Champion Sources of Riboflavin: almonds, cooked beet greens, eggs, fortified cereals, low-fat milk, mushrooms, spinach. .

## 6. How do you pick good Beets?

- **Look for smooth**, hard, and round beets that are **free of cuts and bruises**.
- When possible, choose fresh beets with green tops still attached. **The greens should look healthy**, not wilted or brown.
- Remove the green tops from beets and store each in separate plastic bags, to decrease moisture loss.
- Keep beets in the refrigerator for up to two weeks. Cook the green tops within one to two days.
- Choose low-sodium or no salt added canned beets.

### Just the Facts

- Beet juice is widely used as a “natural” dye to give pink or red coloration to processed foods.
- The color of beet roots can range from dark purple to bright red, yellow, and white. When cut transversely, the roots show light and dark rings, sometimes alternating. The Chioggia beet is red and white-striped, and nicknamed the “candy cane” beet.
- Beets have the highest sugar content of any vegetable.
- Small beets (about a half-inch in diameter) are good for eating raw. Medium and large-sized beets are best for cooking. Very large beets (more than three inches in diameter) may be too woody for eating.

### Serving Ideas

- Steam beets and slip off the skins. Sprinkle lightly with seasonings and enjoy.
- Roast beets with skins on in the oven at 375 degrees for about 40 minutes.
- Add fresh sliced or canned beets to spinach salads.
- Sauté beet greens with chopped onion and garlic for a healthy side dish.