

SFA

Seeds for Africa

Carrots

WHEN TO SOW:

Carrots cannot be transplanted, but can only be grown from seed. In hot climates avoid sowing the seeds during the hottest months, and in cold climates wait for spring or plant 3-4 weeks before the last expected frost. You can plant carrots until midsummer in cool areas. For those of you who live in temperate and sub-tropical areas carrots can be planted all year round. However, those who live in tropical areas should only plant carrots in the cool, dry months.

HOW MANY CARROTS DO I NEED TO SOW:

You can do a lot with a glut of carrots, like making carrot cake, soups, jams etc. However, if you just want to grow carrots for eating straight out the garden without any freezing involved, then 3 x 1 meter rows of carrots is more than enough. Remember though, to stagger the sowing times sowing these rows 2 weeks apart to lengthen your harvest time and to make sure that you don't end up with a glut. Remember too, that you can start pulling carrots very early.

HEIRLOOM CARROT VARIETIES:

For those of you are looking to plant heirloom carrots there are certain varieties that we can recommend. The Cosmic Purple Carrot is an interesting variety. It has a purple outer-skin with an orange core. It matures after 65 - 70 days. The Danver's Half Long Carrot grows to 6 inches, is a stubby, coreless carrot that is ideal for growing in raised-bed gardens as it doesn't grow too long. And finally we recommend Scarlet Nantes, an old French heirloom carrot variety that is best for storing, freezing or canning. And ideally suited for cold climates. It matures in 65 days.

SOIL PREPARATION:

Carrots are root vegetables, as a result the ground has to be well dug over first, before planting. The soil should be light, airy and free of clay, stones and other obstacles. If this is not done, your carrots will be deformed as they try and push their way down through compacted soil. The best way to grow carrots is in raised beds which allow for the type of soil that they prefer.

Carrot growing should be done in a well-drained, deeply dug sandy loam and placed in a sunny spot, although carrots will also grow in dappled shade at a push. However, although they don't like wet feet, carrots need a lot of water, and the soil should never be allowed to dry out. You will get cracked carrots if they are not watered during dry weather. The beds should be dug over with well-rotted manure or compost added to the soil as this helps to retain the moisture in the soil.

Make sure that the manure is well-rotted as if your manure is too fresh it will also cause your carrots to fork or to send out side roots. Another caution is not to over-fertilize or add fertilizers that are high in nitrogen as they can cause the leaves to grow rather than the roots. The soil should be higher in phosphorus and potassium. Potassium is essential for good growth and health. Adding wood ash to the beds is one way of achieving that. The ideal pH value is 6.5 for optimal growing conditions.

For those of you with heavy soils, don't despair. You can grow carrots successfully by choosing the shorter varieties such as Early Chantenay or Baby. Both of these varieties can be used to grow carrots in containers.

Carrot seeds are very fine, and the biggest mistake people make when sowing the seeds is that they are done too thickly. This results in too many carrots growing in one area, and a lot of thinning out to be done which is a waste of the seed.

To make sure that they are evenly distributed and sown thinly mix the seed with a small amount of dry river sand and then sow. An ideal way of doing this is to take an old salt cellar, enlarge the openings a little, and use this to sprinkle your seeds.

Plant to a depth of about a 1/2 inch or 6 mm.

Be patient when waiting for your seedlings to show. They can take anything from 2-4 weeks and need to be kept moist at all times. You may do this by placing wet burlap over the beds but make sure that you remove these once the carrots start to sprout.

THINNING OUT:

Even if you do sow the seed using river sand, you will still need to thin your carrots out. After germination, which will probably take anything from 2-4 weeks, your seedlings will need thinning out. Thin your carrots so that they are 2-3 cm apart when the seedlings are about 5 cm high. A second thinning will probably need to be done when your carrots are 15 cm high. Thin them out to 5 cm apart.

Don't waste the carrots that you have thinned. The first lot of thinned out carrots can go onto the compost heap. The second lot will have roots that are big enough to eat and can be used either raw or cooked.

COMPANION PLANTING FOR CARROTS:

Plants can either grow together in harmony or as enemies. If you are planting carrots you can plant them together with lettuce, chives and onions. Onions are particularly good to plant when you want to prevent carrot fly.

PROBLEMS, PESTS AND DISEASES:

Carrots are like radishes, very easy to grow once you have the soil conditions right. One thing you should prevent is the carrot root tops from turning green. This happens when they grow above the soil line and are exposed to the sun. Just make sure that the carrot roots are well-covered with soil.

With regards to pests and diseases they are fairly free of these. "Top Weight", "Western Red" and "All Seasons" are 3 such varieties that are free from viral diseases. The most common garden pest is the carrot rust fly. However, this can be avoided by good crop rotation practices.

To prevent carrot fly from attacking your carrots, never leave carrot tops lying about after thinning or after harvesting. The carrot fly is attracted to the smell of the bruised leaves. Water well after thinning to dilute the smell. See our pages on natural pesticides for some recipes you can make in your kitchen to get rid of the carrot fly.

The other problem you may have is leaf blight. If you find blight on your carrots destroy any diseased material immediately. Always start with clean, good-quality seed and practise crop rotation to minimize disease.

WHEN TO HARVEST CARROTS:

Most varieties of carrots take about 70 days from sowing to harvest. By pulling the smallest ones out first you can prolong your harvest. The best way is to pull them up by giving them a half-twist. This prevents the tops coming away in your hand and leaving the carrot in the ground! Cut the tops off immediately.

If you don't the tops will continue to grow on the carrot leaving your carrots limp and lifeless as they are taking the moisture and goodness out of the carrot in order to grow.

CROP YIELDS:

So how many carrots will you get as a crop? When growing carrots you can expect a crop yield of about 500 g per 1 square foot, although this depends on the variety of the carrots you have planted. If you are planting early varieties, you can expect a yield slightly less.

STORING AND PRESERVING CARROTS:

If you harvest your carrots when they are young, they can be trimmed, washed and frozen whole. Larger carrots need to be trimmed, washed peeled and then cut up into smaller pieces. Blanch in some boiling, salted water. For small pieces blanch for 2 minutes, larger pieces for 4 minutes and whole carrots for 5 minutes. Now freeze.

To store carrots for a long time you can store them by burying them in wooden boxes filled with moist sand or by covering them in mulched trenches outside.

TIP: Did you know that if you add 1 tablespoon of grated carrot to every batch of jam you make, that you will never have any more trouble with jam setting again? See some of our jam making recipes here.

Carrots are considered one of the top super foods available. They are rich in Vitamin A and Beta-carotene and therefore excellent for your eyes, helps keep your arteries clear, and may prevent tumors from growing. See how to grow blueberries and broccoli, two more super foods.

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