

CELERIAC AND CELERY – HOW TO GET THE BEST CROP

Warmth and water are essential to grow these delicious crops successfully.

As a vegetable, celery has been around for thousands of years and, like many of our modern varieties, it was developed from an unexpected and unpleasant wild ancestor. In the 'Horticulture Register' [March 1835], Lady Hunkloke writes: "Celery in its indigenous state is found during the summer months at the bottom of stagnant drains and ditches. In its original state it is a destructive, rancorous poison, both to Man and Cattle, yet when the plants are removed from their native localities and are cultivated in a garden, they become palatable."

Though wild celery is strong and bitter it is not poisonous, but people have always been wary of umbellifers growing in damp places for fear of picking the truly toxic hemlock or water dropwort.

Celery came to be considered much more than 'palatable' and 'big hoos' kitchen gardeners were obliged to work long and hard to produce beautiful blanched heads worthy of taking centre stage at Christmas dinner. Gardeners, past and present, relish a challenge, so perhaps one of celery's most attractive features was the trouble they had to take to ensure prize results.

While modern self-blanching varieties are easy to grow, they're certainly a slugs' paradise and a haven for rots, so why not go for root celery or celeriac? This easy and reliable variety, *Apium graveolens* var. *rapaceum*, has never been widely grown, even though it's crammed with celery flavour and, when grated, makes unbeatable salad. I'm certainly enjoying celery straight from the garden just now, but wouldn't dream of being without a good bed of celeriac as well.

Celeriac is an easy crop to grow, provided you meet its requirements: like its wild ancestor, it can't get enough water; and it thrives in good, rich soil. As a bonus, it is pretty pest and disease-free and best of all – slugs are unable to make any headway through the root's tough skin. But its one drawback is that it can't stand spring or autumn frost.

Celeriac grows very slowly, so a March sowing is essential. The seedlings are then pricked out into root trainers and the young plants will be ready to face the outside world early in June. At sowing time, you can be sure of practically 100% germination and the young plants are remarkably uniform, so don't sow more than you will need. And again, I can't stress often enough, the virtues of root trainers: they take up so little space in an overcrowded greenhouse; and they do stimulate a strong root system. The only drawback I've found is that the individual cells have a tendency to dry out as the water often misses the small area of compost. The solution is to place the root trainer in a solid container like a washing up bowl, and give the young plants a good soak. Once the compost is damp, the seedlings should be removed to prevent saturation.

When it comes to planting out, you should hold off until the risk of a late frost is past, and, even then, I like to have a cloche ready to pull over if there's a dodgy forecast. Celeriac is best planted in blocks, with 40cm between the plants, so you need to set up the cloche slightly differently to normal. Instead of putting the hoops in a straight line down the middle of the bed, I arrange them in the shape of a square, so that the fleece or environmensch sits at the same height all over the bed. This lets you plant much closer to the edge of the bed without running the risk of the leaves touching the fleece and so being frosted.

As you will gather, this all needs careful organisation, but what planting doesn't? The other main issue for celeriac is water: lots of it and often. One option is to apply the trusty, time-consuming watering can. I've actually scooped out a pool deep enough for a watering can down in the burn, but traipsing up and down for a refill loses its magic after a while, despite the warm glow of satisfaction you get from this worthy water conservation. A speedier hose works well, but, as you probably know by now, I'm a great

fan of a leaky hose, sunk 5cm below the surface. All you need to do is turn on the water every 5 or 6 days, give the bed a good soak and eagerly anticipate that mouth-watering salad in the autumn.

By early September, the roots should have swollen to the size of a lovely big tennis ball and they can be harvested at will. They will stand up to one or two frosts but should then be smartly lifted, to avert an inevitable disaster – soggy, rotting, putrescent lumps on the soil. When I first moved here 30 years ago, I wasn't in the least surprised to waken up one morning in the middle of September to find the wizened remains of courgettes, celeriac and flaccid beans, but now climate change often postpones this black death till November.

When lifted in time, celeriac will store well into the winter provided the roots are kept in a cool, frost and vermin-free place. Cut off and compost all the leaves and remove any loose soil. The traditional method is then to layer the celeriac on sand in a solid wooden box, making sure each root is kept apart from its neighbour. The damp sand prevents any drying out, but I find damp sawdust works just as well, provided it's not highly aromatic. Then again, life in these rural parts necessitates vigilance against that phalanx of large and small rodents that are only too keen to overwinter in our sheds. I have a large, virtually secure press or cupboard for storing apples and potatoes, and there's always some space for a box of celeriac.

Lots of vegetables grow perfectly well in containers, but I'm afraid celeriac is not one of them. You can certainly grow them in a small plot, when you're unlikely to have any surplus to store, but when your crop is larger, be sure you've got enough storage space. Celeriac's too good to waste.