



Vegetable Etymologies

A description of Beets

History: the word "beet" comes from the Celtic word *bett*, meaning red, the colour of the root. Beets have been cultivated for over 2000 years and were originally grown for their leaves, the roots being quite small and not at all like our modern beets. Through the years, the roots were developed into what we see today and many people are unaware that their leaves are still quite tasty greens. *Beta vulgaris*, the species to which most of our varieties belong, is a native of Egypt and the Mediterranean.

Cultivation: *Easy to grow. Direct sow seed in the garden in late spring/early summer 1/2" deep. A second crop can be seeded in late summer. Thin to 4" apart. Companions: bush beans (not runner), lettuce, onions, kohlrabi, cabbage, broccoli and sage all promote growth and deter pests.*

A Description of Kale

History: Kale is an ancient plant and one of the first cultivated brassicas, not much different now than its original wild ancestor. Native to the coastal areas of Britain and northern Europe, kale has been grown for its nutritious and tasty greens for over 2000 years.

Cultivation: *Kale is a cool weather plan. Start indoors 4-6 weeks before the last frost by sowing 1/4" deep in soil-less mix in flats, or direct sow in mid-summer for a fall/winter crop. Thin to 18-24" apart. Companions: beans, beets, and lettuce promote growth; onions, sage, thyme and nasturtiums deter pests including aphids and cabbage moths.*

A Description of Peas

History: Peas are one of the oldest cultivated vegetables. According to Peter Henderson, in his "Handbook of Plants" (1881), the origin of the pea is obscure but is considered to have been southern Europe, and evidence of peas has been found in stone age villages. By the 13th C., it was a British food staple and continues to be to this day. As a child, I learned a popular English rhyme:

*I eat my peas with honey,
I've done so all my life.
The taste is rather funny,
But it keeps them on my knife!*

Cultivation: *Easy to grow. Peas are cool weather crops and should be direct sown in the garden 1/2" deep and 3" apart as soon as the soil can be worked in early spring. Sow again in late summer for a fall harvest. Regular picking prolongs the harvest. Companions: beans, corn, cucumbers, carrots, eggplants, parsley, radishes, tomatoes and turnips.*

A Description of Radishes

History: Radishes are an old and venerable vegetable. They originated in China and spread quickly to Europe and the Mediterranean. The ancient Greeks offered up radishes in "vessels of beaten gold" to the god Apollo. By the 16th C., they had been introduced to England and Gerarde mentioned four garden varieties. By the late 1800's in the U.S., radishes were so prized as an early vegetable crop that over 20 acres of greenhouses were used around New York City to supply radishes to meet that city's demand.

Cultivation: Radishes are one of the easiest crops to grow. They are a cool weather crop and are best direct-sown in successive plantings in very early to late spring and then again in late summer through to early fall. Sow seed 1/4" deep and thin to 2-3" apart. Radishes are often sown with slower-germinating crops like carrots to mark the rows. As the radishes mature and are harvested, room is made for the carrots to expand. Companions: Radishes are one of the best companion plants in the garden and will benefit almost all other vegetable crops except some of the brassicas. Nasturtiums are beneficial to radishes.

A Description of Spinach

History: The common spinach with which we are most familiar in North America - *Spinacea oleracea* - originated in western Asia and was documented by early Arab physicians as a medicinal plant. The first record of it being used as a vegetable was in 1351 and by 1538, it was in common cultivation in Europe, prepared exactly the same way as we currently do. Because spinach is a cold-weather crop and bolts quickly in the heat, other plants were grown throughout the summer or in hot climates that tasted like, and could be prepared in a similar fashion to, spinach. These include New Zealand spinach (introduced to North America in 1772) and Galilee spinach.

Cultivation: Spinach is a cool-weather crop and should be planted as soon as the soil can be worked. Pre-soak seed for a few hours before planting. Sow seed 1/4-1/2" deep. Sow a second crop in late summer. Thin to 8" apart and water regularly. Heat-loving varieties should be planted when temperatures and the soil have warmed up. Companions: peas, beans, eggplants, onions, cabbage, strawberries.

A Description of Turnips

History: Turnips, members of the brassica family, have been grown for thousands of years; Dioskorides listed it in his codex c. 500 AD and it was already well-established by then. As one of the few foods that could be stored and eaten over the winter, turnips were considered an indispensable vegetable. Early settlers brought them to North America as early as 1609 and until the early 1900's, they were grown in every garden.

Cultivation: Easy to grow. Turnips are cool-weather crops. Direct sow outside as soon as the soil can be worked or in late summer for fall crop. Sow 1/4-1/2" deep, 1" apart. Thin to 4-6" apart. Companions: onions, chives, leeks and peas.

A Description of Lettuce

History: The exact ancestor of lettuce is unknown but was probably the wild lettuce *Lactuca serriola*. We do know that lettuce is an ancient cultivated plant - Herodotus reported that it was grown as early as 550 BC. By the time of Henry VIII, in 1530, it was prized as a garden vegetable and Gerarde, in his herbal book of 1597, describes eight varieties. The ancient Romans discovered a unique upright variety on the Greek island of Cos; they popularized it so much that it became known as "romaine" although many still call it "cos" in honour of its birthplace.

Cultivation: Easy to grow. Sow seed 1/4" deep in early spring and thin to 4-6" apart. Continual harvesting encourages new growth. Lettuce is a cool weather crop so sow another crop in late summer for harvesting past heavy frosts. Companions: onions, carrots and radishes.