

How to Grow Parsnips

Introduction:

The Parsnip is a root vegetable closely related to the carrot and parsley, and was certainly cultivated by the Romans. Originally a native of Eurasia it was introduced into this country no later than the 16th century, and was used as a sweetener before the arrival of sugar cane into Europe.

Cultivation:

Planting. Parsnips prefer an open, sunny site on friable soil, rich in humus but not having been manured in the previous year. Before sowing your seeds in March or April (February sowings can lead to failure), warm your soil with cloches or similar, leaving in place until seedlings have developed 2 true leaves. Parsnips do not like being transplanted so do sow direct into their growing position. Either sow thinly 3/4 inches deep (1-2cm) in rows 12 inches (30cms) apart or as parsnips can have poor germination sow 3 seeds every 6 inches (15cm) apart.

Growing. When seedlings are approximately 1 inch high (2.5cm) thin out leaving one seedling every 6 inches (15cm). Keep soil weed free, preferably hand weeding so as to avoid damaging the top of the root. Keep soil evenly moist as this will prevent roots splitting.

Harvesting. Roots are ready to lift when the foliage begins to die down in late summer/autumn. Use a fork to lift roots out of the ground. Roots can be left in the ground and harvested when required however it can be helpful to lift a few extra parsnips in November to ensure you have parsnips to eat in case the soil should be frozen. It is true however that lightly frosted roots do have the best flavour.

Pests and Problems:

Parsnip seeds do not store beyond a year so it is best to discard any unused seed.

Parsnips should not be planted near carrots as they are attacked by carrot fly and other insect pests, as well as viruses and fungal diseases, of which canker is the most serious. Neither should they be planted near celery as the parsnip's leaves can be tunnelled by the larvae of celery.

Parsnips are suitable for growing in large pots/tubs or in borders where soil is not too heavy.

Growing Parsnips for our Annual Show

The class in our Annual Show calls for three parsnips with the tops reduced to 3 inches (75 mm). There are a number of different varieties available from the Kings Catalogue that are suitable for growing for show; these include Gladiator (a reliable

favourite and canker resistant), Sabre and Victor. Each dish should contain one cultivar/variety. The exhibition value of points is dependent upon the difficulty of producing a perfect dish. The maximum points for a dish of parsnips is 20pts; these are divided into the following condition 5pts, uniformity 4pts, size 4pts, shape 4pts, and colour 3pts.

Well grown specimens should be long, with large well tapered roots that are well developed having shapely, white roots that are smooth skinned and free from side shoots and/or blemishes.

Whilst the method of cultivation differs slightly from the above the following methods can be easily used for general cultivation and especially when the ground is stony or comprised of clay.

Long rooted parsnip cultivation is similar to that of long rooted carrots but need a slightly larger bore hole. Deep containers are filled with sand into which bore holes, approx 4inches/100mm diameter, are made using a downpipes. The hole are then filled with a good quality compost (Bloom and Magic fills the bill very well). A couple of parsnip seeds are sown in each. This method can be easily replicated in raised beds with the holes made directly in the ground.

As mentioned above parsnips are notoriously difficult to germinate and whilst they do not like to be transplanted success can be achieved by starting the seeds in cardboard tubes such as toilet roll centres. And alternative is to place a number of seeds in a Tupperware container with damp kitchen roll in the bottom and put in a warm place such as the airing cupboard. Viable seeds will chit within 5-10 days, once chitted plant into the final growing positions asap.