

Beets and Swiss Chard

By mid-April, most spring vegetables have been planted. After the potatoes, peas and broccoli are in the ground, there is still time to add just a couple more colorful treats to your spring vegetable garden. With tops rich in vitamin A and roots (for beets) rich in vitamin C, both beets and Swiss chard are a healthy addition to your family's diet.

Canned, pickled, roasted or in a salad—beets are a versatile root vegetable. Often seeded close together, beets are thinned out as they begin to grow with the tops making a great addition to salad or stir-fry. Plant seeds 1 inch apart and $\frac{1}{2}$ an inch deep. Begin to thin beets when they are 1-2 inches tall until plants are 2-3 inches apart to give the roots plenty of room to grow.

Swiss chard is a close relative to the beet, producing more foliage instead of an enlarged root. The tops of Swiss chard can also be added to stir-fry and salads. Known for the rainbow colored stems, Swiss chard can be one way to get children excited about gardening. Cooking Swiss chard will cause the stems to lose some of the color but picky eaters may prefer the less potent flavor after cooking.

Both beets and Swiss chard are fairly frost tolerant but need careful irrigation to emerge. As you irrigate, try to avoid allowing your soil to crust, which can create a hard barrier that is difficult for the seeds to penetrate. Avoiding soil crusting begins with the addition of compost or organic matter to compacted or heavy clay soils. A light layer of mulch and the use of drip irrigation can also help prevent soil crusting. Drip irrigation also helps prevent foliar diseases by keeping leaves dry. If you cannot use drip irrigation, give plants a slow trickle of water at the base of each plant. Keep plants well watered from planting to harvest to ensure the biggest, healthiest crop.

When selecting beet seed, there are two main types, red round varieties or elongated varieties. Red round varieties include Detroit Dark Red, Early Wonder, Crosby, Ruby Ball, Little Ball, and Ruby Queen. Elongated varieties include Cyndria and Long Red Blood. There is also a white beet variety; Avalanche and a gold; Boldor.

Varieties of Swiss chard include red-stalked varieties such as Burgandy and Ruby, or white-stalked varieties such as Fordhook, Lucullus, and Perpetual.

Weed control is an essential part of care for both beets and chard as they are poor competitors. Use shallow, frequent cultivation, with a garden tool to prevent weed emergence.

Beets are ready to harvest when they reach the size you prefer, between 1-2 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches in diameter. As beets get larger they may become tough and woody. Beets should never be allowed to reach 3 inches in diameter for this reason. For canning, beets should be harvested smaller. To harvest beets, pull the entire plant up and trim the tops to 1" above the roots. Beets can be stored in a plastic bag in the fridge until ready to use.

Swiss chard leaves should be cut off leaving 1” stems on the plant. Use a sharp knife or scissors to avoid damaging the plant. Harvest leaves from the outside of the plant, allowing the leaves on the inside to mature. Avoid harvesting all the leaves at once. Staggered harvests will allow a longer season of harvest. Smaller leaves, around 4 inches, are tenderer for salads or fresh consumption. Larger leaves, 8-10 inches, hold up better to cooking.

Don't forget about beets and Swiss chard in your fall vegetable garden. Most crops suitable for spring gardens in Kansas can make a second appearance in the fall. For the fall garden, plant beets and Swiss chard in early August.