



# Parsnips—A Delicious Storage Crop for Next Winter

By Mike Nuckols, *Commercial Horticulture Educator*



Many people have never grown or eaten parsnips, which is a shame. This root vegetable, which looks like a fat white carrot, has a sweet, nutty taste and grows well in the North Country. Parsnips can be used in a variety of ways in the kitchen – mashed like potatoes, roasted and glazed with maple syrup, added to a hash, or boiled and topped with a touch of butter. Add them to a stew or even grate them into a cake like you would carrots.



Parsnips grow well in our cool climate but there are a few things for growers to remember. To begin with, parsnips are in the parsley family. Like parsley, the seed does not store well. Start with fresh seed every year and never purchase more than you will use in that season. Be sure to purchase seed from reputable growers who have a guarantee on germination rates.

Secondly, parsnips need a long growing season. Plant parsnip seed as soon as the soil is workable. As parsnip is slow to germinate, try and plant into soil that is largely free of weed seeds. In addition, do not plant in soil that was covered in sod the previous season as pests such as wireworm may be present. Parsnips grow best in deep, friable loam that is well-drained. If you have clay soils, work some organic matter into the row before seeding. Otherwise, the clay may crust over and inhibit

germination. Hardpan clay or rocky soils may also cause branching of the roots, as would occur with carrots.

Direct sow seeds ½ inch deep, 1-inch apart in rows 18-24 inches apart. Though some have managed to grow parsnips using transplants, it is not recommended due to the deep taproot on the plant. Should you break that taproot, you might have misshapen roots at harvest. Seedlings, which resemble parsley but with larger leaves, emerge in 2 to 3 weeks. Once seedlings have their first true leaves, thin them to 3 to 4-inch spacing, being careful not to disturb the plants you want to keep. Weeding is also critical at this time. Precision tools such as a wire hoe can be used to remove weed seeds at the thread stage.

Parsnips like even moisture throughout the growing season but will not tolerate being water-logged. Conversely, allowing them to dry out can cause the roots to split. For this reason and to reduce competition with weeds, a mulch is appreciated. Placing mulch around the top of the root will also help to avoid greening of the shoulders, reducing bitterness.

Plants take 110 to 130 days to grow to maturity. Harvest them as you would carrots, digging them carefully with a fork to avoid breaking the roots. Parsnips appreciate frost and can be harvested well into early winter before the ground freezes – usually October or November. In fact, if you are not going to use them immediately, it is best to delay harvest until the last possible time as they store best in the ground. The roots also become sweeter when exposed to cold temperatures. Some growers will leave part of their crop in until March, harvesting them as soon as the ground thaws. Care must be taken in delaying harvest until Spring as roots subjected to freezes and thaws will become pithy and watery. Should you wait until Spring, harvest them as soon as the ground thaws.



For commercial growers, parsnips can be a difficult crop to cultivate at larger scales. Because large fields

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cannot be thinned using equipment, seeds are best planted at final spacing using a seed drill. To reduce weed pressure, consider alternating parsnips with other crops and cover crops. Because many consumers are unfamiliar with parsnip, market gardeners might provide their customers recipes or samples. Storage of parsnips may be difficult for growers without dedicated cold storage for root vegetables. For winter sales, parsnips should be stored at 32°F at 100% relative humidity. They may be stored for 4 to 6 months.

For more information on commercial methods, the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture has published an excellent guide (<http://www.omafra.gov.on.ca/english/crops/facts/parsnip.htm>). Individuals with specific growing questions can contact the author at [msn62@cornell.edu](mailto:msn62@cornell.edu).



*This parsnip, harvested in March 2020, was seeded in a flat and then transplanted into the garden in late May 2019. During transplanting, the main tap root was*

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