

Beetroot

As a child I thought beetroot pretty revolting. It usually came from a tin and when occasionally my grandmother cooked a bunch the result tasted much the same. With its copious quantities of mouth puckering malt vinegar it was enough to put me off it for life! White bread sandwiches stained and soggy from beetroot is not a good memory.

Then I discovered “Borscht” in a tiny Russian restaurant – it was a revelation. A rich flavourful sweet and sour soup served with a dollop of sour cream. Maybe beetroot had more going for it than I first thought! These days, it’s a vegetable I love to grow and cook.

This is how I grow beetroot. Here on the south coast seed can be sown for most of the year and starting seed in autumn works well for me. To prepare the seed, soak overnight in water with a little Seasol added. The rough cork like seed capsules contain two or three seeds so you’ll need to thin the seedlings out as they grow. The young leaves from the thinnings are lovely in a salad and the older leaves are good cooked as you would spinach.

To prepare the soil add some dolomite (a good source of calcium and magnesium which helps make the soil more alkaline). The magnesium makes beetroot sweeter and tastier. I also add some blood and bone as fertiliser – and it’s a good source of potash, which is something growing beetroot really need. Dig these well into the soil before sowing the seed or planting seedlings.

You can plant in seed trays or directly into the ground, just sow the seeds around 10 to 15cm apart at a depth of your first finger joint. Planting a few rows at a time will provide a longer lasting crop with less chance of a glut. Harvest after 8 to 10 weeks, or earlier if you prefer them golf ball size but leave some in the ground for later.

There are many different types available now and it’s worth seeking out some of the more unusual varieties. A few I recommend are “Bulls Blood” which has wonderful deep crimson leaves, a long variety called “Cylindra”, a red and white one called “Candy Stripe” also golden and white varieties. Seeds of unusual ones are becoming more readily available (Berry St Organics in Nowra usually has an interesting range).

Don’t just plant them in the veggie patch – they look great in the garden with nasturtiums, cornflowers and calendulas.

Leave a few plants to go to seed so you have fresh seed for your next crop, they will grow and adapt to your environment and will produce stronger, healthier plants.

Enjoy this most rewarding and versatile vegetable.

Till next time, Mim

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Mim's Beetroot Salad – this is a salad I make often and it's always very popular with guests.

Ingredients:

- A generous handful of herbs fresh from the garden – varieties of thyme, marjoram, oregano, savoury and sage – whatever is thriving
- 4 beetroot steamed and peeled
- 100 to 150 grams of goat cheese or a creamy blue cheese
- 3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- a good handful of walnuts tossed in a dry heated pan
- a few handfuls of wild rocket leaves, red chicory, land cress or even some young horseradish leaves – the bitter and peppery leaves are best suited for this
- 2 tablespoons lemon, lime or orange juice

Method

- Slice the beetroot into wedges
- Remove woody stems from the herbs and chop roughly
- Heat the olive oil in a largish pan and add the beetroot, shaking and stirring to coat for a few minutes
- Add the herbs and mix in well and fry for another few minutes
- Pour the lot over a dish of the prepared leaves, dot with cheese and sprinkle over the walnuts
- Drizzle over with the lemon, lime or orange juice

Bon appetit!