

How to Grow Parsnips

The full flavour of parsnips does not emerge until the parsnip roots have been exposed to near freezing temperatures. Because of this parsnips are known as a winter vegetable.

Parsnips are a good source of carbohydrate, vitamin C, minerals such as potassium and calcium, and fiber. Parsnips can be safely left in the ground over winter and harvested the next spring if required. If doing this you should harvest before the new tops and seed stalks start their growth or else the root becomes fibrous and starchy (losing its sweet flavor). Because of their long growing season many people like to grow catch crops to make best use of their gardening patch.

Preparation: Make sure the soil is well turned over with a spade before sowing. Dig some well composted organic material into the soil before planting.

Sowing: You should plant parsnips in around mid to late spring time when the soil is still warm. Do not use seed that is over a year old.

Germination rates of parsnip seed are not great so sow about 3 seeds per inch and at a depth of around half an inch. You can help germination by lightly rolling the soil or gently trampling it after sowing. Germination may take up to 20 days.

When the seeds have germinated and are seedlings thin the seedlings down so they are about 3 inches apart. If planting out seedlings plant them out at this distance. If you are planting in rows then space the rows about 20 inches apart.

Position: Parsnips will grow well in partial shade or full sun.

Soil type: The soil should be reasonably fertile and of good depth (Parsnips are a root vegetable whose roots can reach 30cm in depth. A soil of low fertility can be identified by stunted growth and the stems turning light green.

Organic compost incorporated into the soil before sowing will help even moisture distribution and aeration.

Tending: When rainfall is lacking over summer water give the parsnips a good watering once a week to ensure continued growth. You can add straw or wood chip mulch after the seedlings have emerged to help retain soil moisture. Remove weeds (if hoeing then hoe only the top inch of soil).

Harvesting: Do not harvest until there has been a couple of weeks of near freezing temperatures. The cold results in the starch in the roots being converted into sugars which give the parsnip its sweet taste.

Use a spade to dig the parsnip root (up to 30cm in depth) out of the ground.

After you have harvested your parsnip roots clip off any remaining leaf stalks and wash and dry the root bulb. They can be stored for many weeks in the right conditions.