

Celeriac (Celery Root) *Apium graveolens var. rapaceum*

By Master Gardener Kathleen Fitzgerald-Orr

Celeriac (also known as turnip-rooted celery, knob celery or celery root) is a root vegetable related to celery, parsley and parsnips. As is the case with many root vegetables, celeriac is not one of the most attractive or well-known vegetables. But celeriac has a secret, and that is its delicious taste. The odd-shaped celeriac has a subtle, celery-like flavor with nutty overtones.

Celeriac is one of the oldest root vegetables in recorded history and is descended from a variety of wild celery--*Apium graveolens*--which is a member of the *Apiaceae* or *Umbelliferae* family. Celeriac was consumed by ancient Egyptians, Romans and Greeks who used the root for medicinal and religious purposes. Celery root achieved culinary importance during the Middle Ages and was first recorded as a culinary ingredient in France in the 17th century. Celeriac is still popular throughout Europe and is a mainstay in Eastern and Northern European countries during the winter months. And it can found on the menu of many Sonoma County restaurants.



Celeriac. With permission,
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The California Master Gardener Handbook suggests three varieties: 'Alabaster' has roots with a strong celery flavor; 'Marble Ball' stores well and the strongly flavored medium-sized roots have smooth skin and a light color; and 'Large Smooth Prague' produces crisp, white roots that store well. Two additional varieties recommended by Cornell University include 'Brilliant' (open-pollinated, early-maturing, European strain with nearly fiber-less, white roots) and 'Diamant' (a hybrid with white interior and standing above the ground for easy harvesting).

["Year-Round Food Gardening in Sonoma County"](#) indicates that celeriac should be planted April through June, and is a cool season crop that grow best in soil temps of 60-65 degrees and air temps of 65-75 degrees. The crops are usually planted from transplants, with 150-160 days to maturity.

Stephan Albert, author of the *The Kitchen Garden Grower's Guide: A Practical Vegetable and Herb Garden Encyclopedia* advises that celeriac grows best in full sun but will tolerate light shade, and prefers humus rich, moisture retentive soil with plenty of rotted manure or compost. The fertile soil is necessary for mild taste. According to Albert, celeriac grows best in cool weather, especially where nights are cool. He advises to sow seed indoors as early as 10 weeks before the average last frost date in spring. Plants can go into the garden on the [average date of last frost](#). Celeriac requires up to 120 days to reach harvest. A late summer crop can be sown directly in the garden where there is enough time for a second harvest. Harvest celeriac when the swollen root is 3 to 4 inches across or slightly larger. Cut stems close to the knobby root; use a garden fork to lift the roots. Celeriac will increase with flavor following a light frost, but should be harvested before the first hard freeze. Leaves can be used to flavor soups and stews.

Celeriac is shallow rooted and requires even, regular watering. Lack of soil moisture will cause celeriac to stop growing. Keep the top few inches of soil moist (not wet) at all times. Keep celeriac planting beds weed free to avoid competition for water and nutrients. Cultivate carefully

to avoid celeriac's shallow roots. As the root develops, snip off the side roots and hill up the soil over the swollen bulbous root to blanch it. The outside of the root will blanch white but the flesh will remain a brownish color.

Due to their close relation to the more common celery plants, celeriac is prone to the same [insect pests and fungal diseases](#). Insect problems may involve celery leaf miners that chew small holes and tunnels in the plant's leaves. They are quite small and will do minimal damage as long as you keep their numbers in check by picking off any leaves that have tunnels in them. Rotate members of the *Apiaceae* family every two years or so to avoid build-up of soil pests and diseases. In addition to celeriac, this family includes celery, carrots, parsley, parsnips, fennel, coriander/cilantro and dill.

Mature celeriac has a starchy flesh, similar to potatoes, and a flavor that has been described as a cross between celery leaves and parsley. Celeriac is low in calories and is a good source of



vitamin K, phosphorus, iron, calcium, copper and manganese. Like potatoes, celeriac can be roasted whole, mashed, cut into fries and baked, or it can be eaten raw. To prepare celeriac using a sharp knife, top and tail the celeriac, then use a potato peeler to remove the rhino-tough skin. Expect to discard about a quarter of the celeriac by the time you are done paring. Store celeriac in the salad drawer of your fridge before use. Celeriac discolors quickly--after chopping it to size, immerse it in a bowl of water with a squeeze of lemon juice or a splash of white wine vinegar (also known as "acidulated water").

Celeriac. K. Fitzgerald-Orr.