

The East London Garden Society

Plant Facts

Celery



Celery is quite different from other vegetables. The first bite delivers an amazing crunch, but it doesn't have that much flavour. However, when sliced up for a garden salad you'll notice how fresh and foody it tastes, adding unmistakable flavour to a variety of dishes, from lentil soup to stir-fries. It can be enjoyed as a delicious snack with nut butter, and it's a perfect finger-food to place on a healthy snack tray with raw grass-fed cheese, pickles and other crunchy raw vegetables.

Celery is a descendant of wild celery, related to parsnips, parsley and fennel of the Apiaceae plant family. Celery is blanched or deprived of light as it's growing to give the stalks a lighter colour and a more delicate consistency. It contains fibre, vitamins A, C and K, folate, potassium and manganese, and is known to decrease inflammation, reduce risk of heart disease and cancer as well as enhancing the immune system.

Many people prefer using the darker green outer stalks for cooking and the paler stalks for eating raw or in dishes like cold egg salad. Celery seeds have a remarkably robust, almost sharp flavour, and it doesn't take much to add flavour and zest to sauces, chutneys and condiments so they're often used for making pickles. Celery seeds are also good in soups and even sprinkled on sandwiches as a topping but remember that a little goes a long way.

Celery seeds must be labelled as food-grade and many grocery stores keep them in stock, but they can also be ordered online. Celery itself can be

purchased in grocery stores, supermarkets and many farmers markets, but it's much healthier grown organically in your own garden.

- Planting from seed and soaking them beforehand is the best method for growing organic celery so soak your seeds in water overnight to encourage germination.
- Prepare a flat plant container with a mixture of half sand and half compost, smoothing it ready for planting.
- Plant the seeds in rows one inch apart and cover each seed with a one-half inch layer of the sand and compost mixture.
- Cover the seeds with a one-half inch layer of sand and then cover the entire container with damp sphagnum moss or burlap until the seeds begin to sprout.
- Place the containers in a sunny spot but out of direct sun, maintaining a temperature of 70 to 75 degrees F throughout the day and around 60 degrees F at night.
- Water the plants liberally and often, making sure they're draining well and have plenty of circulating air. Transplant them into individual pots when they're about two inches high. At six inches high (or about five leaves), take them to an in-between area like a porch for ten days or so to harden off and get used to higher temperatures.

When planting outside, it's best to do so on an overcast day rather than one that's hot and sunny, because celery likes a gradual transition. Space them six to eight inches apart, in rows two to three feet apart, and no deeper than they were when planted in the pots. Once in the ground, add several inches of mulch at the base, give them one inch of water per week and use compost tea every ten to fourteen days. When temperatures fall below 55 degrees F, you can use cloches (bottomless, clear, gallon-sized jugs will do) to protect them. Remove them during the day when it gets warmer.

Celery is typically grown in the north in the summer and the south in the winter, but a second planting is also possible if sown by seed indoors for transplanting outside later. You can also grow new celery from the base of a stalk.