

CELEBRATING CELERIAC

By David Greenberg

Soon after I started market gardening, Michael Howell, the chef and owner of Tempest World Cuisine in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, asked me to grow celeriac for him.

Not sure what it was, I turned to that great source of information—the Johnny’s Selected Seeds catalogue. I learned a bit about celeriac’s basic needs, and ordered seed. That winter, I noticed celeriac for sale at a discount farm market. It had come all the way from California. I brought one home out of curiosity. It did not have much flavour and its texture was spongy and dry. If this was the best celeriac could be, it would remain a mystery why the good chef wanted it so much.

As soon as I tasted my first crop, the answer was clear. Celeriac, like other highly aromatic vegetables, is very responsive to the balanced fertility provided by compost and cover cropping on my farm. The flavour was superb. Celeriac has a rich and nutty celery taste with something extra—a ‘rooty,’ warm earthy tone that is mildly addictive.

Celeriac is closely related and very similar in taste to celery but without the thick leaf stalks of its better-known cousin. The edible portion of celeriac is a swollen bulb-like structure (technically a hypocotyl) that grows at ground level. Numerous hairy roots grow out of the bulb. To the uninitiated, celeriac looks strange, or even ugly.

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While most of the customers at my farmers’ market did not know what it was and were not interested in finding out, a small subgroup did. Every now and then, someone from Central or Northern Europe would notice the celeriac and make a beeline for it, often while smiling from ear to ear. These custom-



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ers would tell me that “back home” celeriac was an essential staple in winter soups, casseroles, soups and sauces.

After cooking with it, I shared celeriac stories of my own. Taking the time to use a favourite ingredient from the “old country” created a warm bond with my European customers. Showing interest in celeriac translated into an appreciation of their homeland, their cooking and, ultimately, of them.

After a few years, I was known as the celeriac farmer by these loyal customers. Some would check in during the spring and summer at market to make sure I had planted lots and was taking good care of it. Of course, this was a tremendous motivation to do a good job.

The whole crop was only two beds, each 4 ft. by 100 ft. in size, but its impact on my sales was significant. By creating this deep connection, these customers made a special effort to buy their weekly produce from me. I think this translated into fifty to one hundred dollars of extra sales each week at the

farmers' market and some especially loyal CSA members.

Seedling production

To start celeriac, I recommend seeding it thickly in an undivided nursery tray in late February or early March. Cover with a ¼ inch of vermiculite. Keep the newly planted seeds moist and warm (25°C/75°F) until they germinate.

When the seedlings have two true leaves, transplant them into 2-inch soil blocks. Dibble a ½-inch hole in each block with a pen or with the long dibbles available from Johnny's. Carefully drop in the bare root seedling and gently pinch the hole closed. If the seedlings are exposed to many cool days with temperatures below 10°C (50°F), they will bolt. I take care to avoid cool temperatures by growing the seedlings on a bench heated with electric cables buried in sand. I cover the bench with several layers of row cover on cold nights and uncover them in the morning.

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Using soil blocks works particularly well as celeriac does not like having its roots disturbed when being transplanted. I use a very rich soil block mix of two parts spent mushroom compost, two parts peat moss, and one part vermiculite. For most other crops, this mix has plenty of fertility to carry them through to transplanting. However, celeriac is a very heavy feeder and benefits from a



foliar application of seaweed and fish emulsion every two weeks starting a month after planting. This extra fertility helps to grow the biggest, most robust plants possible. This is important because there is a strong connection between plant size and the final yield.

Growing in the field

Seedlings are transplanted out in early to mid-May. One year, I planted half the crop in early May and then got terribly busy on the farm. I didn't get the rest of the crop planted until the first week in June. By then, the seedlings were overgrown and had missed precious weeks of cool growing conditions. The late-planted seedlings performed so poorly that I did not bother harvesting them.

I plant celeriac four rows to a bed, aiming for about fifteen inches between the seedlings in all directions.

To keep the plants growing well, I give them an extra heavy dressing of the best compost available. Celeriac has a fine, shallow root system, so it is important to

provide the fertility and water close to the surface. In late June, I sidedress with dehydrated chicken compost at a rate of about two cups per row foot. This is considered to be a heavy application since this compost is so potent. The application is needed only if the original compost applied is not providing enough fertility. By late June, the plants should be growing vigorously with very dark green leaves.

Weeding and watering

With healthy seedlings transplanted into finely tilled, highly fertile soil, there are only two challenges left: weeding and watering. One way to ensure the celeriac gets sufficient water over the course of the summer is to plant a succession of salad greens right next to it, first on one side, then on the other side, and then once again on the first side. The daily watering salad greens demand in hot, dry weather is perfect for celeriac.

I cultivate them with a diamond hoe from Lee Valley Tools. I like to weed up and down the row, wait a week, and then weed the bed

Celeriac in the kitchen

Grating celeriac will release extra flavour. This is especially the case when using it raw. I like to add grated celeriac to winter salads. The following salad is very simple but always a hit.

- 1 large bunch arugula
- ½ pound baby spinach
- 1 large, or 2 small carrots, grated
- 1 celeriac, peeled and grated

Wash and dry the greens. Tear the arugula into bite-sized pieces. Layer the carrots and celeriac on top of the greens. Serve with your favourite salad dressing.

from side to side. This way, most of the bed gets cultivated every week but I don't use any more labour than if I did a complete job every two weeks.

This may sound like a compulsive weeding schedule but I have found it necessary to stay on top of the weeds since celeriac is badly set back by even the lightest weed pressure.

Since weekly hand hoeing is a huge time sink, I have looked for other ways to cultivate it. This past year I saw a beautiful crop weeded by horse-drawn cultivation equipment. Every week or two, my neighbour would use a seven-shank springtooth cultivator and then draw the freshly loosened soil up around the crop with a mouldboard hiller, a tool widely known in the Maritimes as a 'horse hoe.' Plastic mulch also works very well but then drip irrigation is also needed.

Harvesting and storage

A large heavy knife or a small, light machete works well for hacking the crop free of the ground during harvest. You can't pull these crops out of the ground without undue strain to you and probably the celeriac as well. I grab the leafy top with one hand, and cut into

the roots about an inch from bulb, freeing it enough to get it out of the ground. Then I carefully trim off as many of the roots as I can without cutting into the bulb.

For bulbs headed right to market, I leave the central stalks on. They look great and show customers how fresh the product is. Also, some people like to use celeriac tops in recipes that call for a strong celery flavour. When headed for long term storage, the tops need to be removed. I break most of them off by hand except for the small stalks towards the middle. These need to be cut with a knife since they are too flexible to be broken. Just like trimming the

roots, take care to avoid cutting the bulb.

In a market where most customers are not familiar with celeriac, I don't expect it to be a major crop. However, it is becoming more popular. If all of its demanding requirements are well met, it can grow quite large. This is the key to a profitable crop. It does not take more labour to grow a huge root than a tiny one. Not only are the big ones worth more, they sell much better. By the time the rough skin is cut away, there is hardly anything left of the smaller ones. Knowing this, experienced shoppers will choose the largest, most uniform celeriac roots they can find. I always look forward to the challenge of growing this demanding crop for them.

David Greenberg farms and writes in Centre Burlington, Nova Scotia. He has spent 15 years growing organic produce for CSAs, farmers' markets and wholesale accounts.

Photo credits: Jen Greenberg

The wrath of the roots

Several years ago an employee and I both got terrible rashes after pulling weeds in the parsnip patch on a sunny day. The rash felt and looked like a cross between poison ivy and a second-degree burn.

This fall, a similar but less intense rash developed a day after I harvested celeriac on a sunny day. It itched like crazy for two weeks and then healed. The condition, called phytophotodermatitis, occurs in some individuals when handling Umbellifer plants (e.g. carrots, celery, parsnip and celeriac) in sunlight. To avoid the rash, wear gloves and long sleeves when harvesting and thoroughly wash your hands, arms and harvest outfit when done.