

Growing Beets and Carrots in San Antonio

By Karen Gardner, Bexar County Master Gardener



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Carrots and beets are nutritious, delicious and fun to grow. In San Antonio, they grow during the cool season. When the weather gets warm, the flavor and texture are adversely affected. The optimal planting time is in the fall when the weather is cooler - September through the middle of November, although the season can be pushed back as far as August if you are willing to work a bit harder to keep them watered or if we have an unusually cool year. They can also be planted for a spring garden in January and February. Succession planting extends the harvest time and is recommended for carrots and beets. This is done by making several plantings every 2 to 3 weeks rather than planting all of the seeds at one time.

The first step in planting is to find a place to plant. Carrots and beets can be grown in a partly shaded area. The soil must be fertile, loose and free from rocks. If the soil is too hard, growth will be stunted; if rocky, the carrots/beets will be misshapen. In San Antonio, most of the soil is either very rocky (sometimes solid rock) or heavy clay. Raised beds with plenty of compost work best. Loosen the soil well, then rake smooth.

Once your soil is prepared, the fun begins! There are many different varieties of carrots and beets. They come in different colors and shapes. You can plant red, yellow, purple and white carrots. There are little short ones that are very sweet, long fat ones, and even round ones. Beets can be round or cylindrical-red, maroon, pink, yellow, white, or red-and-white striped.

Carrot seeds are sown directly into the garden as they don't transplant well. It's possible to transplant beets, but easier to direct-seed them. The seeds can be sown in rows or scattered over the planting area. To plant in rows, make a shallow row using a hoe or stick. Carrot seeds are tiny. For these, pinch some seeds between your fingers and drop them into the row-4-6 per inch.



Carrots comes in many colors
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Beet seeds are larger and can be placed into the row about an inch apart. After placing the seeds, cover lightly with ¼ inch fine soil.

The method just described seems tedious to me. An easier method for planting in rows is to use seed tapes. These are strips of paper that have seed imbedded in them. You just make a shallow row, lay the seed tape down and cover lightly with ¼ inch fine soil.



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I use the following method. Estimate the amount of seed needed for the area you plan to plant. Sixteen plants per square foot is a good guideline for carrots and beets. Moisten the soil where you will be planting the seeds. Then, mix the seed with fine soil or sand and broadcast over the entire planting area. Mixing with fine soil, especially if it is a slightly different color than the soil in the planting bed, helps to distribute the seed more evenly. Otherwise, it is easy to put too much in one place and run out before covering the entire area. After broadcasting the seed/soil mix, cover very lightly with fine soil. This method also works well for lettuce.

Whichever method you use, make sure that you don't bury the seed too deeply. After planting, water very gently—a mister nozzle is useful for this. Keep the seedbed evenly moist until the seeds sprout. At this point patience is required. Carrot and beets can take 3 weeks or more to sprout.

Once they have sprouted, water them regularly and gently while they are small. Once they are 3-4 four inches tall, water deeply once a week, in the absence of rain. If you notice the soil drying out, water more frequently.

Carrots and beets require thinning. Each beet "seed" is actually a capsule that contains several seeds, so several seedlings will grow from each seed. Getting rid of a perfectly healthy plant can be hard to do (Mommy, you're killing it!), but it has to be done. The plants that remain after thinning will be larger and healthier. The final spacing between plants should be 3-4 inches for carrots and 4-6 inches for beets. When the seedlings are about 2 inches tall, do the first thinning by cutting off the tops of the smaller, less healthy plants. Don't pull them up as this can disturb the ones that you want to keep. The beet tops can be used for salads, so only thin the plants to about 2-3 inches apart in the first thinning. When they are about 6 inches tall, thin again and use the greens.

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