

Nutritious and Delicious Carrots Share in Fall Harvest Spotlight

From the munch and crunch of fresh, raw carrots to the warmth and comfort found in a bowl of rich and hearty carrot soup, this fall root crop, now being harvested in many area vegetable gardens, is chock-full of nutrition - especially Vitamin A.

Carrots, as we know them, originated from forms grown around the Mediterranean. By the thirteenth century carrots were well established as a food in Europe. They came with the first settlers to America, where Indians soon took up their culture and growing.

Carrots are grown from seed directly sown into the garden. Like most other root crops, they do not transplant well. The best planting times are spring and early summer. Each planting will mature in 60-85 days and can be harvested over a 2 to 4 month period. Small plantings every 3 weeks will ensure a continuous harvest. Sow most seeds ½ inch deep. Thin plants to 3 inches apart after germination and use the thinnings in salads, stews, and soups.

Soil for carrots must be rich and loose or the roots of the plant will be deformed. Many seasoned gardeners know that carrots would rather be planted in a sandy soil than in hard clay just for this reason. Manure, unless very well rotted, will cause roughness and branching on the carrots. Also, soil that is allowed to significantly dry out causes carrots to split. Harvest carrots when they are 2 inches or less across. The smaller the carrot, the tastier it will be. Big size doesn't mean big taste when it comes to this root vegetable.

Carrots differ mainly in their sizes and shapes. Some are long, slender, and tapered while others are short, thick, or even round. The short to medium types are better adapted to heavy or rough soils. The long carrots do better in the lighter, sandier soils. The tiny finger carrots are often the sweetest and grow well in containers.

Long carrots tend to grow 8-10 inches long. Medium carrots, like the Nantes or Danvers Half Long, grow 6-7 inches, and short carrots tend to stay at 3-4 inches.

I like to wash the dirt off my carrots as soon as I harvest them so the dirt doesn't become hard and "cemented" to the vegetable. Make sure that the carrots are thoroughly dry before you store them in the refrigerator. If you store them wet, they will more than likely turn moldy or rot.

To make the most of this nutritious vegetable, don't pare or even scrape them. Just scrub well under cool, running water.

To cook, boil carrots quickly in salted water. Serve with butter and a sprinkling of parsley and chives. Added to slow-cooking stews, they improve as they take on the flavor of the meat.

For other great carrot recipes, read on. Enjoy the taste and nutrition of one of America's best-loved and delicious fall root vegetables!

Marinated Carrots

5 cups sliced carrots	1 medium diced onion
1 green pepper, diced	
½ cup salad oil	1 cup sugar
¾ cup cider vinegar	1 tsp. salt and pepper
1 tsp. prepared mustard	

Cook carrots until tender. Drain and cool. Combine all remaining ingredients and marinate carrots in mixture at least 12 hours. Drain and serve.

French Carrot Soup

4 T. butter	10 medium carrots, sliced and peeled
1 large onion, thinly slice	2 leeks, white part only, sliced
10 cups chicken broth	¼ lb. bacon, cut into ½ inch pieces
Salt and pepper	1/3 cup uncooked rice
1 cup whipping cream	

In large saucepan, heat butter to melt. Add carrots, onion, and leeks. Saute over medium heat about 10-15 minutes until soft. Add broth, bacon, sugar, and seasonings. Bring to boil; cover and simmer slowly for 20-25 minutes or until carrots are tender. Add rice and cook an additional 20 minutes until rice is cooked. Puree in small batches until smooth. Return to saucepan. Add cream and heat just until thoroughly warm. Serve 8-10 immediately.

Creamy Carrot Parsnip Soup

In this recipe, carrots pair up with another root vegetable from the garden, parsnips!

8 cups chopped carrots	6 cups chopped, peeled parsnips
4 cups chicken broth	3 cups water
2 tsp. sugar	1 tsp. salt
1 medium onion, chopped	4 garlic cloves, minced
1 tsp. grated, fresh horseradish	¼ tsp. ground ginger
3 T. butter	2 cups buttermilk
2 T. sour cream	Fresh dill sprigs (optional)

In a soup kettle, combine the carrots, parsnips, broth, water, sugar, and salt; bring to a boil. Reduce heat; cover and cook for 25-30 minutes or until vegetables are tender.

In a skillet, saute onion, garlic, horseradish, and ginger in butter until tender. Add to the carrot mixture. Transfer soup to a blender in batches; cover and process until smooth. Return to the pan. Stir in buttermilk; heat through, but do not boil. Garnish servings with sour cream and dill. Yield: 12 servings or 3 quarts.

Carrot Casserole

4 cups sliced carrots	1 large onion plus 3 T. butter
1 can cream of celery soup	½ tsp. salt

¼ cup diced American or cheddar cheese ¼ cup melted butter
 3 cups onion-garlic croutons

Cook carrots until just tender. Saute onion in 3 T. butter. Grease casserole dish. Mix carrots, soup, salt, and cheese; put in casserole dish. Top with ½ cup melted butter, tossed with 3 cups onion-garlic croutons. Bake 30 minutes at 350°.

Morning Glory Muffins

2 ½ cups all-purpose flour	1 ¼ cups sugar
3 t. ground cinnamon	2 t. baking soda
½ t. salt	3 eggs
¾ cup applesauce	½ c. vegetable oil
1 t. vanilla extract	2 cups grated carrots
1 medium tart apple, peeled and grated	1 can (8 ounces) crushed pineapple, drained
½ cup flaked coconut	½ cup raisins
½ cup chopped walnuts	

In a large bowl, combine the first 5 ingredients. In another bowl, combine the eggs, applesauce, oil, and vanilla. Stir into the dry ingredients just until moistened (batter will be thick). Stir in the carrots, apple, pineapple, coconut, raisins, and nuts. Fill greased or paper-lined muffin cups 2/3 full. Bake at 350° for 20-24 minutes or until a toothpick comes out clean. Cool for 5 minutes before removing from pans to wire racks. Yield: 2 dozen.

Surprise Carrot Cake

3 eggs	1 ¾ cups sugar
3 cups shredded carrots	1 cup vegetable oil
2 cups all-purpose flour	2 tsp. baking soda
2 tsp. ground cinnamon	1 tsp. salt
½ cup chopped pecans	

FILLING

1 package (8 ounces) cream cheese, softened	¼ cup sugar
1 egg	

FROSTING

1 package (8 ounces) cream cheese, softened	¼ cup butter, softened
2 tsp. vanilla extract	4 cups confectioners' sugar

In a mixing bowl, beat eggs and sugar. Add carrots and oil; beat until blended. Combine the flour, baking soda, cinnamon, and salt. Add to carrot mixture; mix well. Stir in pecans. Pour 3 cups batter into a greased and floured 10-inch fluted tube pan.

In a mixing bowl, beat cream cheese and sugar. Add egg; mix well. Spoon over batter. Top with remaining batter. Bake at 350° for 55-60 minutes or until a toothpick inserted near the center comes out clean. Cool for 10 minutes before removing from pan to a wire rack to cool completely.

For frosting, in a small mixing bowl, beat the cream cheese, butter, and vanilla until smooth. Gradually add confectioners' sugar. Frost cake. Store in the refrigerator. Yield: 12-16 servings.