

Rooting for celeriac

Versatile, with a great taste and aroma, celeriac is an easy 'root' vegetable that deserves to be grown more widely – which is why West Dean hosted an RHS Trial of it last year

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Celeriac is a biennial, native of Europe and Asia and commonly grown as an annual. It is closely related to celery, sharing its leaf appearance and to some extent its flavour. However, celeriac (*Apium graveolens* var. *rapaceum*) tends to be more disease resistant. The part that is eaten is the knobbly, swollen, globe-shaped stem that develops in response to regular, even watering in summer: where this is the case, globes can reach a diameter of 12–15cm (5–6in).

Growing in the trial

Celeriac may not win the vegetable glamour stakes but behind its bumpy exterior has a flavoursome flesh that can be roasted, stewed, blanched, mashed, or sliced and diced as an ingredient for casseroles and soups, or shredded raw into remoulade.

With this in mind the RHS trialled celeriac in 2011 in the walled kitchen garden at West Dean Gardens near Chichester in West Sussex. The

objectives of the trial were: to assess a range of celeriac cultivars; recommend the Award of Garden Merit (AGM) to outstanding cultivars for garden use; and to demonstrate the cultivation of celeriacs in the UK.

At the beginning of March 2011, the seed of 12 different celeriac cultivars was sown into cell trays using seed compost, and placed in a heated propagation house. Before sowing, all seeds were pre-treated with a fungicide soak against leaf spot (*Septoria apiicola*). Most germinated successfully; there was some variation, however, with the seed of 'Monarch' which produced a rogue plant.

During April the seedlings were potted into 9cm (3½in) pots to encourage a larger root system, ready for the prevailing light soil conditions in the garden. As the weather was warm then, they were placed in a frame outdoors to harden off.

Before planting out in May, an application of Vitax Q4 fertiliser was



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The RHS Vegetable Trials Assessment Panel (above) judging the celeriac trial at West Dean Gardens, an RHS Partner Garden open free to members at certain times (see *RHS Members' Handbook 2012*, p78).

applied to the ground, but at half the recommended rate (the other half was saved for later and used to enhance the development of the crop). The celeriac was planted in rows 45cm (18in) apart with 30cm (12in) between plants, and watered in with Maxicrop. Additional water was applied during May but there was sufficient rainfall over the following three months. Due to the abundant rain in summer 2011 and concurrent lack of sun, the crop generally was



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Block planting of celeriac, rather than growing in rows among other crops, makes selective watering easier.

not as flavourful as might be expected, although the AGM cultivars that were tasted again in autumn had a slightly stronger flavour.

The celeriac was inspected by the RHS Vegetable Trials Assessment Panel in September 2011, which recommended cultivars such as 'Prinz' because they fulfilled the following criteria: excellence for

ordinary use; availability; reasonable resistance to pests and diseases; good constitution; and stability in form and colour.

Celeriac is often overlooked by gardeners but, by paying attention to watering evenly through the summer months, it will reward the keen grower and cook with a versatile, tasty vegetable for winter use. ●

SUPPLIER DETAILS (see box, above right)

A DT Brown: 0845 371 0532; www.dtbrownseeds.co.uk
B Elsoms: 01775 715000; www.elsoms.com
C Kings Seeds: 01376 570000; www.kingsseeds.com
D Marshalls: 0844 557 6700; www.marshalls-seeds.co.uk

E Mr Fothergill's: 0845 371 0518; www.mr-fothergills.co.uk
F More Veg: 01823 681302; www.moreveg.co.uk
G Nicky's Nursery: 01843 600972; www.nickys-nursery.co.uk
H Pro-Veg Seeds: 01223 499130; www.provegseeds.com

I Unwins: 0844 573 8400; www.unwins.co.uk
J Suttons Seeds: 0844 922 2899; www.suttons.co.uk
K Thompson & Morgan: 0844 248 5383; www.thompson-morgan.com
L Simply Seed: www.simplyseed.co.uk

RHS Trial

After the 2011 trial, five celeriac cultivars were awarded an AGM (two subject to availability). Judges considered yield, appearance, taste, bulb shape and colour, smoothness of skin, uniformity, size and texture.



Plants receiving AGMs (see below left for suppliers)

❖ **'Cisko'** (award subject to availability): fairly vigorous plants producing deep, white-skinned globes with smooth skins and a dense interior.

❖ **'Monarch'** (1993 award reconfirmed): some variation in consistency with the seed, but most plants were attractive and had white skins, deep globes and good interiors. Suppliers: **A, D, E, I, J, K**.
❖ **'Neon'** (award subject to availability): relatively smooth, white-skinned cultivar with attractive, healthy, mid-size foliage. Deep, slightly oval globes.

❖ **'Prinz'** (2000 award reconfirmed): compact plants with healthy foliage and deep, smooth, white-skinned, well-shaped globes. Suppliers: **C, F, G, H, L**.

❖ **'Rowena'**: attractive white-skinned, deep globes with healthy foliage. Supplier: **B**.

www.rhs.org.uk For information on celeriac or to download the *Celeriac Final Trials Report 2011*, enter 'Celeriac' in the search box at RHS Online.

Regular watering is essential for celeriac stems to swell.



GW/JOHN SWITHINBANK

Growing celeriac at home

❖ For the most reliable results, sow celeriac seeds under glass during March. Seeds can be sown directly outdoors if night-time temperatures do not fall below 10°C (50°F). Carefully prick out emerging seedlings into 7cm (3in) pots when large enough to handle.
❖ Grow seedlings between 15 and 18°C (60–65°F), as excessive cold spells can lead to premature flowering (bolting).
❖ Gradually harden off before planting outdoors between the end of May and early June.
❖ A moisture-retentive, free-draining soil is best. Sites prone to late-spring or early-autumn frosts are best avoided, as celeriac can suffer frost damage at temperatures colder than -1°C (30°F).

❖ Transplant young celeriac plants in rows 45cm (18in) apart with 30cm (12in) between plants. Do not bury the crowns but keep the stem base at ground level. Regular, even watering encourages swollen stems to enlarge. A thin layer of mulch, such as straw, can help conserve moisture in summer months.
❖ Remove side leaves as they split throughout the growing season as this helps maintain air flow and aids the development of smoother, easier-to-peel skins.
❖ Weed regularly and monitor for pests and diseases such as celery leaf miner, celery leaf spot and slugs. All harvesting should be completed before the first frosts in autumn.

Vegetable growing event at RHS Harlow Carr p83

Celeriac 'Monarch'.



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