

## Root veggies hold sweet promise

“The roots of all goodness  
lie in the soil  
of appreciation for goodness.”  
the Dalai Lama

Sweetness in the vegetable kingdom lies a bit deeper than potatoes, among familiar faces like carrots, sweet potatoes and beets along with the less utilized parsnips, rutabagas and jicama. Sweetness is revered in the U.S, though too often for many of us it is purely sweet tastes like candy, ice cream and cake. The sweet taste has a harmonizing or nourishing effect on the body, particularly the digestive organs. In overabundance the sweet taste causes dampness and unwanted heat in the body leading to a variety of symptoms which could include, for example, acne and other skin conditions, indigestion, urinary difficulties or inflamed joints. Some root vegetables offer sweetness balanced with other tastes, helping maintain our health and providing therapeutic value when we are ill. The slightly bitter undertone of carrots and beets tends to drain excess heat from the body, while the mild pungency of parsnips and rutabagas has a dispersing effect on stagnation. Within this balance, sweetness can simultaneously be at its tastiest and healthiest. One way to fully appreciate this is through fresh vegetable juices. The variety of flavors is sparkingly differentiated, like tasting fine wine.

Carrots and parsnips, close botanical cousins, both have unbeled flowers--tall sprays atop leafy stalks. Modern research supports the traditional view that carrots maintain eye health, especially night vision. And while carrot juice is a great way to benefit, the key nutrient carotene is better available to the body after cooking which breaks down the cell walls containing the beta-carotene. Cooked carrots with a bit of sweetener like sugar or honey can be beneficial for indigestion. Fresh carrot juice can aid a cough when there is heat in the lungs.

Parsnips may be the most underappreciated of vegetables. More popular in colonial America than potatoes, they were a staple in Europe until the potato came to predominate in the mid-1800's. Though potatoes may be more versatile, parsnips have fewer calories and sweetness rivaling sweet potatoes. They are richer in vitamins and minerals than carrots and high in potassium and folic acid. Those who follow dietary guidelines related to blood type take note that parsnips are especially beneficial for those with any of the blood types. As with potatoes, parsnips are best prepared with moist accompaniments like olive oil, ghee, butter, yogurt or milk. Combined with fresh ginger to make a tea they can be useful in treating a common cold when warmth is needed, or to treat pain caused by cold (add cinnamon or dry ginger).

Both in the West and Asia, beets have traditionally been held to be nourishing to the blood. Research has shown the pigment in red beets, betacyanin, along with their high fiber content, to perhaps have some protective effect against certain cancers (e.g. colon and stomach). While they contain more sugar than carrots or sweet corn, the slightly bitter undercurrent beets possess becomes pronounced as they mature or if grown in dry conditions. This bitterness makes them cooling. Beets should be avoided by those with a history of kidney stones due to their oxalic acid content. And yes beets really can turn urine red, so no need to be alarmed.

Rutabagas (from the Swedish *rotabagge*, where the vegetable originated as a cross between a kale and white turnip) acquired a reputation as famine food in Europe during World War I and have never fully recovered. Often the butt of humor (including the annual International Rutabaga Curling Championship at the Ithaca, New York farmer's market), they deserve more attention both for flavor and nutritional value. As Garrison Keillor has pointed out “So many people confuse rutabagas with turnips. They're not alike at all.” Rutabagas have sweetness with a unique pungency and a sunny yellow-orange color. Dishes that include them need not be lowly. I recall years ago making a tepanade from a recipe by James Beard combining rutabagas with mushrooms simmered for 12 hours—worth the effort. On the homey side, rutabagas can be part of a rainbow mash including parsnips, carrots and beets. And rutabagas apparently made it to China a good while ago as they have been produced in a preserve with roses in Yunnan province for seven hundred years.

Like carrots, sweet potatoes are rich in beta-carotene and stand out among starchy vegetables in their ability to stabilize blood sugar and improve response to the hormone insulin. Native to Central America, they are actually botanically distinct from yams, which are larger, lack sweetness and came from Africa and Asia. The yams sold in U.S. groceries are in fact species of sweet potatoes. The name yam was applied to orange-flesh sweet potatoes in the U.S. in the mid-twentieth century to distinguish it from the white-fleshed sweet potato that had been common until then. Popular in China, where much of the world's crop is now grown, sweet potatoes are known in traditional Chinese medicine to be beneficial for jaundice when cooked with winter squash and pearl barley.

Often substituted for water chestnuts in Chinese dishes because of its crispy white texture, jicama (pronounced hee-kah-mah) is related to the sweet potato. It has been eaten for centuries in its native Central America and is slowly becoming popular in the U.S. Its high water content and delicate sweetness make it excellent in juice, and with half the calories of potatoes due to its low carbohydrate content, it can substitute in some potato recipes for those wishing to lose excess weight.

California is a land where it is sometimes difficult to feel rooted. Most of us came from somewhere else, so clarity of purpose or connections to friends and family help us feel rooted. Eating root veggies can provide a reminder of the Dalai Lama's insight into what makes for good roots. That reminder can be as close as our lunch or dinner tables.

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