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Black Salsify in the Garden

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Summary

Black salsify (*Scorzonera hispanica*), is also known as Spanish salsify. Black salsify is a cool season crop grown primarily for its long, brown-black roots, but its leaves can also be used as fresh greens for salads. The roots of black salsify tend to be longer, smoother, less fibrous, and of a finer texture than regular salsify. It is also more cold hardy, but requires about the same length growing period as regular salsify, which is 120 days. The cultural practices for both are also generally the same. Both have an oyster-like taste which gives them the name “oyster plant” and both are highly suitable for diabetic diets.

Varieties

Purchase high quality seeds from a local nursery or seed catalogs. The seeds should be sown directly into the soil in early spring so there is no need to grow transplants.

How to Grow

Soils: Salsify prefers deep, fine textured, well-drained soils with good water holding capacity. Work the soil 18-24 inches deep to reduce compaction so the plants can develop long, straight roots with few deformities. Plants prefer to be within a pH level of 6-8.

Soil Preparation: Before planting, incorporate 2-4 inches of well composted organic matter or 4-6 cups of all-purpose fertilizer (16-16-8 or 10-10-10) per 100 square feet of planting area. Rocks and other large objects should be removed to reduce root deformities.

Planting and Spacing: Because salsify is a cool season crop, it needs to be sown as soon as the soil

can be worked in northern areas of Utah and can be fall seeded in more mild areas of the state. Seeds should be planted about ½ inch deep in rows 10-15 inches apart with plants spaced two inches apart within the row after thinning.



Water: Salsify originated in Southern Europe so it prefers a regular supply of water, keeping the soil at a constant moisture level. Irrigate with 1-2 inches per week to maintain a moist, but not wet soil.

Fertilizer: Apply ½ cup of a nitrogen based fertilizer (21-0-0 or 34-0-0) per 25 foot of row in mid-summer. Place the fertilizer to the side of the plants and irrigate it into the soil.

Problems

Weeds: To reduce weeds without chemicals, cultivate often when weeds are small, practice crop rotation, and mulch around plants with grass clippings, straw, or newspapers. Cultivate shallowly and avoid root pruning to ensure uninterrupted growth.

Pests and Diseases: Salsify is not susceptible to many common production problems. Rotating planting locations from year to year helps control most diseases.

Insects	Identification	Control
Aphids	Green or black soft-bodied insects that feed on the underside of leaves. Insects that reduce plant yield and vigor and are especially harmful to young plants.	Use appropriate insecticides, insecticidal soaps, or strong water stream to dislodge insects.
Diseases	Symptoms	Control
White rust	Yellow spots on upper side of leaves	Use appropriate fungicides; reduce moisture levels.

Harvest and Storage

Salsify roots are very hardy and are not damaged by freezing so roots can be dug, topped, and stored or left in the garden until needed. However, the roots get brittle when frozen so they should be handled with care.

Store salsify like topped carrots. Store roots at 32°F and 95-98% relative humidity. High humidity is important for keeping roots from shriveling. When stored correctly black salsify roots should last about six months.

Productivity

Each plant produces one root and several leaves that are available from late fall to early spring. Plant 5-10 feet of row per person for fresh and storage purposes.

Frequently Asked Question

Q: Why are some of my roots splitting? This is a disorder salsify commonly contracts, but the reasons for contracting it and control are actually unknown. The best thing to do is try to reduce plant stress as much as possible. There are also some varieties of salsify being developed that have a higher resistance to this problem. Splitting has no effect on root taste.

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