Ask an Expert: Four Reasons to Give Beets a Chance

Kathy Riggs

09/26/2016

When it comes to eating beets, it seems there are those who love them, those who strongly dislike them, and not many folks in between. If you are in the group of beet lovers, you probably already have a favorite way to prepare them and use them in side dishes or salads. Others may need some convincing before taking steps to include beets in their diets. Consider these reasons to give beets a chance.

* Beets are good for you. One of the best reasons to develop a taste for these red-root vegetables is because they are a good source of folate, which helps manufacture red blood cells and other genetic cells throughout the body. Beets are also a good source of the mineral manganese needed for normal body growth and health. Calcium and potassium are other beneficial nutrients found in beets. Calcium is known to strengthen bones and teeth. Older adults also rely on the help of calcium-rich foods and supplements to ward off osteoporosis. Potassium works to keep blood pressure low, helping the heart function efficiently.

* Beets add nice color and interesting texture to salads and side dishes. Before slicing beets for a salad, the outer skin or peel must be removed. It can be removed while the beet is raw, but it will be to your advantage to wear food handler gloves to avoid staining your fingers. Most find it easier to roast or boil beets before peeling.

* Beet greens add even more nutrients. Don’t give into the temptation to discard them. The greens are a great source of lutein, an antioxidant that helps protect the eyes from age-related macular degeneration and cataracts. They also contain a wide variety of phytochemicals that may help improve the health of your eyes and nerve tissues. Beet greens are often grown for use in commercially bagged salads. They can be exchanged for Swiss chard or spinach in a salad, and the reddish veins in the leaves break up the shades of green to add interesting color. To preserve the crispness of home-grown beet greens, they should be harvested, washed and refrigerated quickly in a breathable plastic bag, then used within the next 2 to 3 days. They can usually be found at farmers markets if you don’t have them in your garden.

* Beets can be preserved for later. If fresh beets aren’t appealing to your palate, consider preserving beets as part of your home food storage. Home-canned beets are good to have on hand to cut or shred for soups, salads and other side dishes such as borscht and gazpacho. For approved recipes for preserving beets, contact your local USU Extension office or visit the National Center for Home Food Preservation. There you will find recipes for whole, cubed or sliced beets, as well as pickled beets.

The color of beet roots can range from dark purple to bright red, yellow and white. When cut transversely, the roots show light and dark rings, sometimes alternating. The Chioggia beet is red and white-striped, and nicknamed the “candy cane” beet. Beet juice is widely used as a “natural” dye to give pink or red coloration to processed foods. Beets have the highest sugar content of any vegetable. Small beets (about a half-inch in diameter) are good for eating raw. Medium and large-sized beets are best for cooking. Very large beets (more than 3 inches in diameter) may be too woody for eating.

Beets are a brightly colored, healthy food choice that can be enjoyed year round when properly preserved. If you haven’t yet, give them a chance!

By: Kathy Riggs, Utah State University Extension family and consumer sciences professor, kathleen.riggs@usu.edu

What Next?
Get useful tips like this as soon as we release them. Sign up here.