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## Creative Carrots

The carrot is a noble vegetable, crisp and sweet in its raw state, earthy and rich in a roasted incarnation. Its culinary versatility is exceptional: dipped or dipped into, juiced raw or puréed into soups, even carved into intricate floral tributes. How can you resist growing carrots in your garden?

The carrots we harvest today bear little resemblance to their wild ancestors. In neolithic times, carrots were gnarled, small and spindly. Thousands of years of carrot breeding have not only improved their appearance but also eradicated their bitter taste and given us a smooth, sweet, succulent root. Orange varieties of carrot have existed since medieval times, and were depicted as early as AD512 in a Byzantine manuscript. This rather shatters the widely held belief that orange carrots originated in the Netherlands in the 16th century as homage to William of Orange. Orange carrots were undoubtedly widely cultivated in that region, however, and today's varieties are likely their descendants.

Carrots are straightforward enough to grow if you're aware of a few potential hazards. First off, you must sow carrot seed in the place the carrot will grow. You can't transplant carrot seedlings because the first root sent down by the seedling ultimately forms the carrot. Inevitably, this root will be damaged if you move the plant, resulting in a forked carrot or one that quickly bolts and goes to seed. Second, carrot seeds take a relatively long time to germinate. You need to nurture them for up to two weeks before you'll see any result, or longer if the temperature drops below 10°C. Finally, beware of slugs and snails, which can eat every seedling that comes up before you even see them – you think you're still waiting for germination, whereas you've missed their very brief appearance above the soil surface altogether.

If you're not deterred by these hazards there are ways to help avoid them:



Rachel Knight's Christmas carrots

- » Cultivate and improve the soil so it's easy for the carrot roots to penetrate.
- » Use fresh seed, as it doesn't keep well.
- » Spread a 1–2-centimetre layer of potting mix on the soil surface before sowing to suppress weeds and aid germination.
- » Space carrots in a grid 8 centimetres apart in each direction, with two to three seeds at each position, to minimise thinning and weeding.
- » Sow on a calm day so that the tiny seeds don't blow away!
- » Thin seedlings to one at each position as soon as they emerge and weed at the same time if required.
- » Water in the morning so the soil is dry when slugs and snails emerge at night.
- » Patrol for slugs and snails on damp nights with a head torch and deter them by putting out a dish of salty water.

You can grow carrots very successfully in many types of containers, although if you want longer roots you obviously require deeper pots. I've had an excellent crop of 'Samantha' carrots from a polystyrene crate this year. I sowed them in October and we ate them on Christmas Day. Carrots will grow through much of the year once they've started, and you can sow seeds at any time the soil is warm and moist enough. The plants may barely grow during the winter if they don't get much sun, but you can harvest them

at this time and have freshly dug carrots for the table throughout most of the year.

The satisfaction of pulling a handful of bright carrot goodness from your own soil is enormous. Home-grown carrots are sweeter, crisper and tastier than anything you'll purchase. They may not all look as pristine as the ones you buy in the supermarket, but I assure you that you won't want to trade the aesthetics for the taste.

Different coloured carrots taste similar, but as they retain their colour when cooked they make for interesting soups, mash and dips. Carrot varieties to try include:

- » **Orange:** 'Touchon', 'Amsterdam Forcing', 'Berlicum', 'Kuroda Improved'
- » **Red:** 'Scarlet Nantes'
- » **Purple:** 'Purple Dragon'
- » **Yellow:** 'Lubyana'
- » **White:** 'White Belgian'
- » **Round:** 'Paris Market'
- » **Mini:** 'Mini Sweet'
- » **For ponies, rabbits and giant carrot competitions:** 'Orange Jumbo'