

# What about Beets?

If you ask people whether they like beets, there seems to be no middle ground. Either you love beets or you hate beets. I must admit that I lean more toward the latter camp and never think of beets, reasoning that there are so many good foods available. However, this humble root vegetable is now deemed a “Superfood” as it is packed with iron, potassium, calcium and vitamins A and C and dietary fiber, all those things doctors and other gurus say I need. Besides that, beets are easy to grow in most climates and are available pretty much year round here in the Willamette Valley. Therefore, I determined to learn how to cook beets and see if my taste buds had changed. After all, I am a grown up now. So I set off on a culinary adventure. Here is what I found.

**To Peel or not to Peel before cooking beets, is that the question?** Some cooks advocate that the raw beets be peeled with a paring knife or vegetable peeler before boiling or roasting. Other cooks adhere to the principle that keeping the skin and taproot intact helps retain juices and concentrates flavor better and that the only reason to peel before cooking is to make borscht or to dye Easter eggs. It comes down to the fact that beets are messy. So, it depends on how messy you are willing to be. Paring the skins before cooking would seem to be somewhat less messy and less risk of burning or staining your fingers. Especially if peeled under running water. . On the other hand, handling a warm/hot slippery round beet while trying to get its skin off could be messier. Some have suggested using dishwashing gloves for a better grip over plastic gloves. To peel while the beet is still warm, waiting 5-10 minutes after removing from oven. Using lemon juice to bleach stained hands. Using bare hands, paper towel or toweling to rub off skins. **You be the judge.** Try both methods and see which you prefer in terms of taste, time, convenience and ease of use. No matter how you do it, beets are messy. So, wear an apron, grab your gloves, cook up more beets than you need and store, either by freezing or in the refrigerator for several days.

**Selecting and storing Fresh Beets and Beet Greens:** First, you have to find good beets and keep them for short or long term use. You can tell the freshness of the beet by the condition of the greens attached. If you intend to use the fresh greens in a salad, saute or soup or for freezing, pick ones that are not yellowed, frayed or wilted. If beets are sold without greens, select beets that are unblemished, no cracks, scratches or cuts on the skin.

Trim the greens from the beet, leaving the beets with a 1-2 inch stem and the taproot attached. **Be careful not to bruise, cut, scrape or break the skin or remove the taproot. Otherwise, the sweet juices will escape during storage and while cooking, leaving a pale and less flavorful beet.** Before cooking, wash the beets carefully with a soft brush . Store the greens and the beets lightly rinsed in the refrigerator separately in plastic bags, left open in the crisper with a paper towel to regulate moisture. The beet greens should last 1-3 days. The beets with their taproot attached should last for a week or two in the refrigerator.

For longer term storage, pack beets in sand or peat moss in a box or plastic tub so they do not touch and stored in a cool place, ideally between 33-39 degrees F such as a garage, basement, or crawl space for up to 5 months. Just dig out a few from the top layer, checking and removing any that show signs of rot. If you are gifted that many beets or grow them, this is good information.

**Using raw fresh beets and greens:** Beet greens can be used fresh in salads. Try planting a row of beets in your garden and harvest some of the young leaves for salads. Saute or stir fry as you would chard, spinach or bok choy for a tasty side dish. Or chop for soups. Or include them in juices for a source of calcium, iron and vitamins A and C.

Raw beetroots, peeled with a paring knife or vegetable peeler, can be used raw, sliced or grated in salads and soup recipes. Or juiced with a juice extractor. Good source of calcium, potassium and iron. Many recommend combining beet juice with other veggies, fruits, citrus or berries for a more palatable drink. As a rule, you can extract 6-7 ounces of juice per pound of beets or greens. Juice recipes can be found on the internet or with your machine. Fresh juices don't keep well so use them within a day or so. Serve chilled or over ice.

**Canned or Pickled Beets** Keep pints or quarts of canned or pickled beets on your shelves for holidays and dishes throughout the year, especially in the winter before spring beets and their greens come in season. Consult the OSU Extension publications or the Ball Blue Book of Food Preservation for canning and pickling recipes for beets. Canning beets must be canned in a pressure canner but pickling beets can be done in a boiling water bath. Use safe, tested recipes for all beets as they are low acid vegetables to avoid any risk of botulism and assure your family and friends have a good, flavorful product. .

**Freezing:** Raw beets do not freeze well so you do need to fully cook the beets. They can be cooked by boiling, steaming, microwaving or roasted. Select small beets, uniform in size, unblemished.. Before cooking, clean with a soft brush but avoid breaking the skin. When tender, cool and rub the skins off using rubber gloves to avoid staining hands. Use rubber gloves to rub the skins off. Small beets can be frozen whole or quartered, diced or in 1/4" slices. Tray freezing works well for beets. Spread pieces on a tray or baking sheet in a single layer and place in the freezer. When frozen, pack into freezer bags and store. You can take out what you need. To use, thaw the cooked beets and heat through. Use in any recipe requiring cooked beets. ..

**Beet greens:** Remove any tough stems and wash thoroughly. Cut into 1-2 inch lengths. Blanch 1-2 pounds at a time in boiling water to cover for no more than 2 minutes. Using a slotted spoon or colander, remove greens and cool quickly in ice water. Drain and pack into freezer containers or bags with water still on leaves. Lay the bags of greens flat in the freezer so they can be stacked, taking up less space. To use, thaw and prepare as you would chard, spinach or bok choy in stir fry, soups or casseroles.

**Boiled or steamed beets:** Boil whole with stem and taproot attached or use a vegetable steamer. Cover small beets with water in a saucepan, bring to a boil and cook gently, covered, until tender. Young beets will be done in 30-40 minutes, depending on size. Older, larger beets may take an hour or more. Beets should yield to slight pressure, using a finger or the edge of a knife. A fork will let juices run out. When cooked, drop into cold water for a minute. Once cool, the skin can be easily rubbed off with the hands. Highly recommended to use rubber gloves or paper towels to avoid staining your hands.

**Boiling/Steaming Beets in a Microwave Oven:** The quickest way to cook beets is in the microwave, ideal for quantities of about 1 pound at a time. It also preserves more nutrients than boiling or any other cooking method. It may take some effort to get the timing right with your microwave to come out perfect. But the effort is worth it. Use beets that are about the same size or cut larger beets into uniform sized pieces so they cook evenly. Small to medium beets can be kept whole without cutting. Wash thoroughly. ***Pierce the skin in several places to prevent steam from building up inside the beet and exploding inside your oven.*** Place beets evenly spread in a microwave safe dish, generally a 2 quart baking dish or 8x8x2 square glass dish or a pyrex pie plate all work well. Add 1 inch of water. Cover with a lid, plate or microwave-safe plastic wrap or with a damp paper towel. .

To calculate time, figure microwaving one beet on full power for 7 minutes, adding 2 minutes for each additional beet. . For instance, to cook 3 medium sized beets you will need from 12 to 15 minutes. Regardless of cooking time you calculated, as soon as you can smell the beets, stop the heating and test a piece because they are close to ready. Press the beet with the blade of a knife works best to see if it is soft.

Turn the beets 180 degrees halfway through cooking time to make sure they cook evenly unless you have a rotating tray. When beets are done, leave the cover on the dish in place for 4 minutes. Beets will continue to cook during the rest period and will assure a more evenly cooked beet. When cool enough to handle, rub the skins off with your hands, using rubber gloves to avoid staining.

**Baking Beets in a Microwave** is an alternative method to cook beets with a slightly different flavor. . In this method, prepare the beets the same as above but do not add water to the dish, leaving it uncovered.. (You can also place the beets on a paper towel directly into the oven) Microwave 1 beet on full power for 5-10 minutes, depending on size. Add 2-3 minutes of cooking time for each additional beet. As soon as you smell the beets, stop the heating and test for softness. Once cooking time complete, remove from the oven and wrap in foil, letting them rest for 3-5 minutes before unwrapping and peeling them. Or you can skip the foil, rotate the dish and cook for 1-2 more minutes longer before removing from the oven and peeling.

**Conventional oven for Roasting and Baking Beets:** Roasting concentrates the sweetness of the vegetable and caramelizes the natural sugars, bringing out the full flavor. This method also preserves flavor, color, vitamins and nutrients. As I looked for the best way to roast beets and other root vegetables, I found there are almost as many methods as cooks. Here are the basic top four:.

1. Wash and dry the beets, leaving the 2" stem and taproot. Preheat the oven to 375 F. Arrange beets in a baking dish with ½ cup water per pound. Cover tightly with foil. Place baking dish on middle rack in oven, bake slowly until tender, about 45 minutes for small beets 1",: 1 hour for medium beets and 1 ¼ hours for larger beets. Done when beet is soft and can be pierced through with a skewer or knife tip.. Cool enough to handle and remove the skin.
2. Scrub the beets well, carve an X at both ends of each beet and wrap each in foil, unpeeled. Place packets in a roasting pan or place directly on the oven rack at 425F for 50-60 minutes, depending on size. Cool and remove skins. .
3. Drizzle beets with olive oil and wrap in parchment lined foil. Roast in a 450F oven until tender, about 1 hour. Let cool before peeling or rubbing the skins off.
4. Wash and trim leaves and upper stem to 2 inches, leaving the taproot. Place in a single layer in a foil lined baking dish and cover tightly with foil. Roast the beets in the 450F oven for 4-5 minutes to 2 hours (very large beets may take even longer). Start checking for doneness at 45 minutes. Use a pair of tongs to flip the beets every 30 minutes to make sure they roast evenly. Small beets can be removed when done. If not done at 45 minutes, roast and check at 10 minute intervals until done. Uncover the beets, allow to cool 5-10 minutes till you can easily handle them. Remove beet skins and tails.

**Resources:** The internet has a wealth of information about beets but when it comes to food safety and methods, OSU Extension Service has publications about growing beets and preserving beets by freezing, canning and pickling available to download and print free at their website: <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/fch/food-preservation>. Another website called [www.healthy-beets.com](http://www.healthy-beets.com) dedicates its entire content to beets from selecting and storing beets and greens in the refrigerator, or for the winter, to pickling, freezing, roasting, boiling, grilling, grating raw and juicing.

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