Carrots are an up and coming crop with new varieties being developed both for superior nutrition as well as for unusual colors, at least as far as us current orange carrot consumers are concerned. Worldwide, carrots rank in the top ten of vegetable crops. Backyard vegetable gardeners routinely grow them as they are fairly easy to cultivate, they do not have a lot of pest problems and homegrown carrots are so much sweeter and tastier than anything one can buy in a store.

Carrots belong to the Apiaceae family which also includes parsnips, coriander, dill, anise and celery. Pollen from plants in this family has been found dating back to the Eocene period that extended from 55 to 34 million years ago. It is believed carrots were growing in what is now Afghanistan about 5000 years ago. They were first used for their seeds which were thought to have medicinal properties. The root was small, tough and bitter. Early carrots were purple, black, white or yellow.

Sometime in the sixteenth century, the orange colored carrot was developed and stabilized by the Dutch. Holland became a leading breeder of carrots by the 1700s and all of our modern orange carrots come primarily from four early Dutch varieties. Via explorers and conquerors, the carrot made its way to other continents and new populations. It came to North America with the first English settlers that landed in what is now Virginia in 1607.

Now carrots are divided into several types primarily by shape. Nantes carrots are of medium length and cylindrical. Danvers are also cylindrical but have thicker roots and a higher water content making them suitable for juicing. The ‘Danvers’ carrot is a true American heirloom originating in Danvers, Massachusetts.

The carrots you purchase at the grocery store are Imperator types which are extra-long and durable enough to be shipped. Chantenay are more top-shaped with wider tops making them suitable for planting in heavy or shallow soils. Miniature or baby carrots are either globe-shaped or cylindrical and short. Contrary to popular belief, those baby cut carrots sold in stores are just larger carrots cut down to bite size. Actually, it is a clever way to use misshapen carrots so they do not go to waste.

To be a successful carrot grower, select a site with a well-drained, loose soil, relatively free of rocks and having a pH around 6.5. Plants should receive at least 6 hours of sun each day.
Seeds can be planted as soon as the soil is workable usually in early to mid-April. Carrot seeds are quite small and it is hard to plant three seeds to the inch so either your carrots will need to be thinned or one can purchase seed tape where the seeds are spaced for you. A few radish seeds can be sown along with the carrots. The radishes sprout in 3 or 4 days and will mark your carrot row while you wait almost 3 weeks for the carrots to germinate. Seeds should be sown about ¼ inch deep. Often succession plantings at 3 week intervals are made to extend the harvest.

Carrot seedlings are wispy and small so keep the bed weeded to avoid competition for light, water and nutrients. Young seedlings are thinned to 4 to 6 per linear foot of row. Carrots mature in anywhere from 50 to 80 days, although you can pick your own baby carrots by harvesting when not quite mature. Use carrots right away or store in the refrigerator as they need cool temperatures and high humidity to keep from shriveling.

The only pest I have occasionally encountered is the carrot rust fly. Adult flies lay eggs in the soil near carrot plants and after they hatch, the larvae move to the carrots and tunnel into the plants feeding on the roots. Control with pesticides is difficult so home gardeners may want to try row covers. I usually sow several small rows of carrots throughout the garden and rotate where I plant them each year to minimize damage.

Another common pest of carrots according to Jude Boucher, retired UConn Extension Educator and Coordinator of the Vegetable Integrated Pest Management training program, is the carrot weevil. This tiny, one-fifth inch brown weevil chews holes on the top of carrots and lays its eggs. The larvae hatch and burrow into the top third of carrot roots making them both unmarketable and unappetizing. To control carrot weevils, Dr. Boucher recommends a biological control called beetleGone which contains a new species of the bacterium, *Bacillus thuringiensis galleriae* (Btg). It would be mixed with water and applied to the soil to control the larval stage.

You have probably heard someone say that eating carrots will improve your vision. That is because orange carrots in particular contain beta carotene and our bodies need this naturally occurring antioxidant to produce vitamin A which has been linked to healthy skin, a strong immune system and good eye health. Carrots that are particularly high in beta carotene, like ‘Mokum’, will be listed as such.
Newer varieties of carrots, like 'Atomic Red' boast of high lycopene levels which is reputed to help prevent certain cancers. For a fanciful feast, try some of the purple carrots such as ‘Purple Haze’ or ‘Deep Purple’. My favorite baby carrot is ‘Little Fingers’ but the ball-shaped, French heirloom ‘Parisian’ is tasty too.

Carrots have been around for thousands of years and for good reason. They are nutritious, delicious and not difficult to grow. Try some this year and growing carrots will become habit forming!

For questions on growing carrots or other horticultural topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.