

The Year for Celery

UConn Home and Garden Education Center

ARTICLE BY SUSAN PELTON

A long time ago in a yard far, far away I planted my first garden. Actually, it was a little more than 30 years and about a mile and a half from our current home but it may as well have been in another galaxy. That was in the days long before I knew anything about soil testing, amendments, and whether crops could be cool or warm weather. I cleared the sod in the back yard and planted every seed and plant over one Memorial Day weekend. It will come as no surprise that the radishes, spinach, lettuce, and peas did nicely for a few weeks until the heat of July hit and they all bolted. The tomatoes, squash, and green beans did better, happy to have been planted into the warming soil and temperatures. I slowly learned from my errors as we all do when gardening, thankful that most mistakes can be corrected the following year. There was one vegetable that flummoxed me during those early years to the point that I have never tried to grow it again but I think that this year I will try it again: it is celery.

Celery can be a fidgety vegetable to grow. In the Northeast, celery seeds must be started indoors well before planting time, 10-12 weeks prior to the last frost. Most gardeners feel 'frost safe' by Memorial Day weekend so 12 weeks before that would bring us to the first week of March. Celery seeds require light for germination so the seeds

should be very shallowly planted or even surface sown and kept moist and warm, 70-75 °F, for the 14-21 days that it will take for them to sprout. After that, the temperatures should be in the 60-70 °F range as celery seedlings will bolt (go to seed) if they get cold. When planning to transplant be sure that the nighttime temperatures will be consistently above 55 °F. Celery is one vegetable that does not require hardening off (the reduction of water and increased sunlight) before it is transplanted and should be irrigated immediately after transplanting.

The garden itself should be prepared the year before planting by getting a soil test from the UConn Soil Nutrient Analysis Lab (www.soiltest.uconn.edu). Celery needs a neutral pH in the 6.0 to 6.8 range so most Connecticut soils will need the addition of limestone to raise the pH. The soil should also be tested for boron, copper and magnesium as celery is a heavy feeder of these minerals. Excess potassium will adversely affect celery in the form of brown cracks. Do not plant in heavy clay soils as celery roots want to penetrate down 2 feet or so. A loamy soil that is rich in organic matter is the best choice although drainage is not of the utmost concern. Celery started out as a marshland plant so it can tolerate having wet feet.

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Celery will require further attention once it is in the garden. It needs an ample and uniform supply of water so a drip irrigation system is a good option. Mulching celery plants can help retain moisture. And then, there is the blanching. Celery stalks may become bitter as they mature and turn green. Blanching is the process of covering the stalks, keeping the leaves exposed, so that chlorophyll does not develop. This is usually done by forming hills of soil up around the stalks or by wrapping them in newspaper or brown paper bag collars until harvest. Keep in mind that stalks that are buried in soil to blanch will require more post-harvest cleaning. For the shortest harvest time at 60 days, consider planting Afina cutting celery, a slim, hollow-stemmed annual with fine green leaves that is great for soups.

There is a current resurgence in the heirloom varieties of celery, not only for home consumption but in recipes and at restaurants. Most of the green celery that is grown for commercial use in the United States is the 'Pascal' cultivar in the species *Apium graveolens*, which is ready for harvest around 115 days after transplanting. The self-blanching varieties include the 'Golden Heart' and 'Golden Self-Blanching' (80-118 days to harvest) with stems that turn from green to pale white as it matures. 'Giant Red' celery (85-95 days to harvest) with purplish stems that turn pink

when cooked, needs to be blanched as it matures or its stems will turn bitter. 'White Plume' and 'Pink Plume' heirloom varieties, with their compact plants and slim stalks, were very popular during Victorian times and are ready to harvest in 80-90 days. 'Chinese Pink' celery has a bright bubblegum color that will add its brightness to any garden or recipe. These varieties and more may be found through many seed companies both in stores and on-line.

For information on starting seeds, vegetable gardening tips, 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.



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