History of Parsnips

Parsnips are a member of the carrot family, which comes as no surprise when you look at the resemblance in size and shape. This starchy root is native to the Mediterranean—it was widely cultivated by the ancient Greeks and Romans. During the Middle Ages and Renaissance, it was as popular as the potato. Originally the size of a baby carrot when full grown, it was found that the parsnip grew bigger as the Roman Empire expanded to colder, northern climates. Our northern climate in Vermont is great for producing parsnips! Here, they can grow to the size of large carrots and are enjoyed for their nutty, slightly sweet and spicy flavor.

Benefits

- Parsnips are an excellent source of vitamin C, B9 (folic acid), and the mineral potassium. They also contain: B5 (pantothenic acid), B6 (pyridoxal phosphate) calcium, copper, magnesium and phosphorus.
- Parsnips are generally a great detoxifying food for the body.

Fun Facts

- Parsnips are a close relative to parsley; parsley, in turn, can be bred to develop a parsnip-like root (see High Mowing Seeds’ Eagle Parsley Root on their web site).
- Parsnips were used as a sweetener in Europe, during a time when sugar was hard to come by and honey was expensive; they were replaced by the sugar beet in the 19th century.
- Parsnips were considered an aphrodisiac ("love potion") by the ancient Greeks and Romans.

Reading Corner

Children’s Books
» "Tops and Bottoms," by Janet Stevens

Sources: Vermont Department of Agriculture, Vermont Fresh: A Fruit and Vegetable Guidebook, The Visual Food Encyclopedia, Windham County Farm to School.

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Parsnips

**Winter vs. Spring Parsnips**

*Winter parsnips*: These parsnips are harvested in the late fall or early winter, usually after the first hard frost, and stored in root cellars.

*Spring parsnips*: These parsnips are stored in the ground during the winter months and harvested in early spring. In Vermont, we appreciate parsnips' ability to overwinter in our cold environment and still taste delicious come spring, thanks to our hard frosts that convert their starches into tasty sugars.

**CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS**

**English | Parsnip Posey Poetry**

Directions:
- Have students come up with one word to describe the parsnip using their senses (feel, taste, scent, sight, sound) and then combine all of the words to make a poem.
- To add a twist, have students create two poems, with the goal of unveiling the similarities and differences between parsnips and carrots.

Source: Shelbure Farms “Project Seasons”, GMFTS.

**Math | Parsnip Dimensions**

Supplies needed:
A variety of parsnip sizes, rulers, tape measurers, scale, measuring cup, large cylinders that easily fit whole parsnips.

Directions:
- Have students split into teams or have them work individually, depending on class size and available materials.
- Measure weight, length, and diameter of parsnips; measure volume via how much water the parsnip displaces.
- Have students compile their measurements using a chart on the classroom board, then calculate averages.

**Science | Biennial Lifecycle of Parsnips**

Supplies needed:
Blank paper, pencils, markers/colored pencils/crayons, pictures or tangible examples of annual, biennial and perennial food crops.

Directions:
- Discuss the difference between annual, biennial and perennial with the students.

  *Annual*: A plant that takes one year or growing season to complete its lifecycle.

  *Examples*: Tomatoes, beets, winter squash and wheat.

  *Biennial*: A plant that takes two years or growing seasons to complete its lifecycle.

  - **Year one**: vegetative structures form: roots, stems and leaves.
  - **Year two**: after a period of dormancy (winter), the plant flowers, produces seeds and fruits and dies.

  *Examples*: Parsnips, turnips, endives and parsley.

  *Perennial*: Plants that persist for multiple years or growing seasons.

  *Examples*: Asparagus, rhubarb, apples and thyme.

- Have students illustrate the difference between a parsnip in its first year and a parsnip in its second year.
- You can use this drawing as an opportunity to label parts of the plant: roots, stems, leaves, flowers, fruits, and seeds.

Source: GMFTS.

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