

My son, now in his mid-twenties, reached over and stole a tomato wedge from my plate just last week. I didn't think anything of it until he said, "Bet you never thought you'd see me do that." Oh my goodness, he ate a raw tomato right before my eyes. This kid wouldn't even touch my chili or vegetable soup if the tomatoes hadn't cooked down enough to be unrecognizable.

Our tastes can change as we go through life. It doesn't hurt to revisit foods like tomatoes, spinach, okra, or beets that didn't appeal to you when you were younger. Take beets, for instance. If you are not a fan of beets, maybe your earlier experience was only with canned beets. Fresh beets from the garden are great prepared many ways such as in soups and salads, pickled and creamed.

Beets don't take much space, so if you have some room in the garden or a small area to prepare a new bed, try a few this year. Beets are grown as a cool weather crop in North Florida. Seeds should be sown September through early March in well prepared planting beds located in full sun. Fertilize according to package directions, weed by hand around plants, and keep the soil from drying out (fluctuation in soil moisture will cause beet roots to crack).

Seeds are produced by this biennial plant during the second year of life if the beet is not harvested. Beet 'seeds' are actually the dried fruit. Each 'seed' contains several true seeds that will germinate and appear as a clump of seedlings. Even if you space your 'seeds' several inches apart, you'll still need to thin these seedlings. Use a small pair of scissors to trim out excess seedlings to avoid damaging the roots. The thinned-out seedlings are a treat in fresh salads.

Several heirloom varieties that are recommended for North Florida include Early Wonder, Detroit Dark Red, Cylindra, Red Ace, and Yellow Detroit. Depending on the variety, these may be harvested from 50 to 80 days and vary in flesh color from red to yellow to red/white striped. They are tolerant of moderate frosts and freezes but it is best to cover young plants during cold snaps. Larger beets tend to be 'woody' so harvest beets when they are the size of a golf ball.

Tastes change, so try something new, or old, especially if it's good for you and it's easy to grow. For more information on fall gardening, contact the UF Master Gardeners at 752-5384 and read the Florida Vegetable Gardening Guide <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/vh021> (*Published 11-4-12*)

