**The Roots of Rutabagas**

*October, 2018*

1. **What is a Rutabaga**
2. Did you know that rutabagas are only called rutabagas in the United States? Throughout the rest of the world, this root vegetable is called a “swede” or “Swedish Turnip” or “yellow turnip” and is a cross between the turnip and wild cabbage. The world “rutabaga” comes from the Swedish dialectal world “rotabagge.” (rot = root, bagge = short, stumpy object)
3. Its botanical name is “Brassica napus.”
4. As a food source, the root, as well as the leafy vegetables, are utilized, depending on the culture. The leaves are used much like other leafy vegetables, such as spinach or Swiss chard, while the root meat can be prepared in similar ways to potatoes, either mashed or roasted. Some other cultures use it as a filler in various casseroles and mincemeat.
5. Rutabagas do have a unique flavor, and have become a staple food in many counties around the world. It is considered a healthier alternative to the potato because it has more minerals, vitamins, and other compounds that are beneficial to human health.
6. There are a couple different types of rutabagas. The most common type is the American purple top rutabaga. It is, as its name suggests, purple at the crown and yellow below. The other type is the Ruta-Bits rutabaga. This is a smaller variety that comes to the market un-waxed and have a very thin skin so they don’t need to be peeled before they are eaten.
7. **History of the Rutabaga**
8. The first known printed reference to the rutabaga comes from the Swiss botanist, Gaspard Bauhin in 1620. It was noted it was growing in Sweden at the time.
9. It’s also noted to have originated in Scandinavia or Russia and there are contradictory accounts of how rutabagas arrived in England…some say by Germany and some support Swedish origins…tough to say!
10. Like the turnip, rutabagas were once considered a “food of last resort” during WW1 and WW11 when there were food shortages in Germany and in France.
11. Boiled stew with rutabaga and water as the only ingredients was a typical food in Germany during the famine between 1945 and 1949. As a result, many Germans have many “unhappy” memories of this food. And may be a reason it’s not a favorite for some!
12. During WWII a diary written by an anonymous young girl from the Lodz Ghetto wrote about food and hunger during that time and how it affected many people. In one of her writings she talks about how her father smuggled food for their family to survive and came home one evening with two stolen rutabagas. Each of the rutabagas were divided into 3 portions to feed the entire family.
13. Americans were growing rutabagas as early as 1806. Warm temperatures about 75 degrees can damage rutabagas, so they are mostly grown in the northern states and in Canada.
14. **Nutrition & Health Benefits of Rutabagas**
15. Rutabagas contain a diverse range of nutrients, including high levels of manganese, potassium, phosphorus, magnesium, calcium, iron, and zinc. They also contain vitamins C, E, K, and members of the Vitamin B family. They also contain organic compounds such as glucosinolates and carotenoids.
16. Rutabagas are rich in complex carbohydrates meaning they contain a good amount of both insoluble and soluble fiber. One cup of rutabagas has 3.2 grams of fiber. Compare this to one cup of potatoes which only has 2.2 grams of fiber.
    1. Fiber does way more than just keep you regular. The rough stuff can also help lower cholesterol, keep your blood sugar stable, making it easier to lose weight, and help you live longer! Older adults should be aiming for at least 21 grams per day for women over 50, and 30 grams for men.
17. Rutabagas also contain a high amount of Vitamin C. One cup of fresh rutabaga cubes provides over 35 % of the daily recommended amount of Vitamin C. Rutabagas also supply some B vitamins, iron, and potassium.
18. Yellow-fleshed rutabagas also contain some beta carotene. Our bodies convert beta carotene into Vitamin A. It also is an antioxidant that protects our bodies from free radicals that can lead to inflammation and cancer. Some studies suggest that those who consume at least 4 daily servings of beta carotene rich fruits and vegetables per day have a lower risk of developing cancer or heart disease.
19. Rutabagas also contain zinc. This mineral is a key component of many enzymatic functions throughout the body which makes them efficient.
20. Rutabagas contain vitamin B-6. This vitamin plays a role in hormone production in the brain and helps prevent mood disorders and other brain diseases. Getting enough B-6 also helps with energy production and better concentration.
21. **Growing, Selecting, Storing, and Cooking Rutabagas**
22. Not many gardeners actually grow rutabagas as it’s not a popular vegetable to eat. However, rutabagas can be beautiful as they have pale-gold roots with peppery cabbage flavor that sweetens as it cooks. The kale-like greens can also be delicious.
23. Rutabagas grow well in cool weather and can be harvested well into the winter.
    1. A rutabaga plant grows about 12-24 inches high and 8-12 inches wide. The bulbs can get to the size of a softball, or larger. (That is the typical size you would spot in a grocery store.) However, they are best when harvested smaller at 3-5 inches in diameter.
    2. The greens can be harvested any time after they reach 4 inches tall. If you don’t harm the top of the bulb, they greens will continue to regrow. The longer the bulbs stay in the ground after the first frost, the sweeter they are. You can dig them in the fall or you can leave them in the ground with a thick layer of straw mulch and harvest as needed.
24. When buying the rutabagas in the store, you will most likely see them always trimmed of their taproots and tops, and are often coated with a thick layer of clear wax to prevent moisture loss.
    1. The skin that’s visible through the clear wax should be free of major scars and bruises. Make sure there is no mold on the surface of the wax.
    2. They should feel firm and solid, and never spongy.
    3. For sweeter flavored rutabagas, choose the smaller ones.
25. If you’re not storing your own home-grown rutabagas in the ground, they can stored in the house similar to potatoes.
    1. The best conditions for home rutabaga storage are moist but not wet, and cold but not freezing. Keeping them in the fridge without the wax coating is too dry for them.
26. Rutabagas can be frozen and kept for six months to a year. Be sure to peel them and either chop into cubes, then blanch them in boiling water before freezing to stop enzyme action, or boil and mash them and store in plastic bags.
27. Rutabagas can be eaten raw, but large ones may be strongly flavored. Make sure to peel the waxed skin off the rutabaga before cooking. A trick is to quarter the rutabaga first before peeling as it is easier to handle. A sharp paring knife is easier than a vegetable peeler for this one.
    1. Rutabagas do become more strongly flavored when cooked. The odor is mild compared to its Brussel sprout and cabbage cousin.
    2. When well prepared, their sweet, somewhat peppery flesh makes them an excellent side dish as well as a tasty addition to salads, soups, and stews.
    3. Ideas to add to your meals:
       1. Add sliced rutabagas to potatoes as they cook then season and mash.
       2. Add grated rutabagas to potato pancakes
       3. Add chunks to your soups or stews.
       4. Roast cut up rutabagas alone with plenty of oil and seasoning.
       5. YUM!
28. **Rutabaga Fun Facts**
29. The International Rutabaga Curling Championship takes place annually at the Ithaca (New York) Farmer’s Market on the last day of the market season. This international event brings competitors from a variety of countries to compete in the “Turnip Toss” (Kids Division) and the “Rutabaga Curl” (Adult Division. No other vegetables are allowed to be used in the event, and the curler must bring their own. *(See picture of the Rutabaga Curler)*
30. Askov, MN is the former “Rutabaga Capital of the World” and was a hub of rutabaga cultivation until the rutabaga warehouse burned down in the 1970s. The city of Askov is currently home of the annual Askov Fair and Rutabaga Festival, held during the fourth weekend of August.
31. Of course, the local “Cumberland Rutabaga Festival” takes place every August and this year was the 86th year of the celebrations. This 4-day festival is filled with the “Baga Olympics”, Truck Pull, Food Stands, Live Entertainment, Golf Scramble, Arts & Crafts Fair, and much more!
32. With all the festivals having “rutabaga games,” it appears that people would rather throw this vegetable around rather than eating it! HA-HA

