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Close-up of celery plantation. Plants should be spaced 6-8 inches apart in rows 2 feet apart.

Question: Is it possible to grow celery in the Umpqua Valley?
Answer: Celery (*Apium gaveolens* var. *dulce*) is a staple in the garden because it's so useful in the kitchen – for stews, stir-fries, soups, salads and snacks.

In addition to having a crisp, tasty crunch, celery is high in vitamin K, vitamin A, folate and potassium. Celery is considered both a vegetable and an herb belonging to the genus *Apium* and the family *Apiaceae*, which also includes coriander, celeriac, parsley, fennel and carrots.

Native to certain regions in Africa, Asia, and Europe, *Apium* plants flourish in marshy growing conditions. Celery makes a surprise appearance in Homer's "Odyssey," referenced as *selinon*, the Latin form of the Greek word for the plant. By the 1600s, celery was a staple flavoring throughout Europe, known in France as *celer*. It is not known who brought celery to the Americas, but by 1806, four cultivated varieties of celery were recorded in North America.

Learning how to grow celery



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is simple. The main features this crop requires are rich soil and plenty of water. Celery needs five to seven hours of full sun every single day, so make sure you pick somewhere bright.

You can buy seedling transplants from nurseries, but cultivar choices expand enormously when you grow celery from seed. You can choose standard varieties such as *Ventura*, experiment with self-blanching types such as *Golden Boy* and *Tango*, or try red-stalked varieties such as *Redventure*.

Do not direct seed celery into your garden. Instead, sow seeds indoors 10-12 weeks before the last average spring frost. At 6 inches, transplant them into the garden in a bed that's high in organic matter. Space the plants 6-8 inches apart in rows 2 feet apart. Set

them no deeper than they grew in their pots. Apply several inches of mulch, and provide at least 1 inch of water per week. Feed your plants every 10-14 days with compost tea or a liquid fertilizer.

If night temperatures are consistently below 55 degrees, protect plants by covering them with cloches or light-weight fabric cloth; otherwise, the stalks may become weak.

Some popular varieties that do well in our area include:

■ **Tall Utah:** This popular variety grows to crisp, stringless one-foot stalks. It's perfect for snacking on right out of the garden (with peanut butter, of course).

■ **Tango Hybrid:** This sweet, extra-crunchy variety grows extra tall: up to 18 inches! This variety matures faster than older celery varieties, too – enjoy it just 85 days after planting. Plus, it's hardier to temperature fluctuations, making it a nice choice for beginners.

■ **Chinese or Cutting Celery:** If you prefer celery with a stronger flavor and hollow stalks, this is the variety for you. 'Chinese' celery grows well in cooler climates. It grows

up to 12 inches tall and matures in 100 days.

■ **Redventure:** A stunning colored and robust, red celery variety that will become your favorite for its continual harvest of gorgeous succulent stalks.

Here's another way to start a celery plant. Did you recently buy a bunch of celery from the grocery store? Don't throw it away! Instead, cut off the base. Set it in a bowl of water to soak, keeping it near a window. The cut stalks should face upward. After a week has passed, you'll notice tiny green leaves growing in the center of the base.

Transfer it to a pot or your vegetable garden and cover everything but the little leaves with the same loose, moist soil you'd use for planting celery seeds. Keep the celery plant watered and watch as new stalks grow from the old base. It's really kind of a beautiful life cycle to witness.

Depending on the variety, you can harvest celery 85-110 or so days after transplanting. Once the stalks are at least 6 inches tall from the bottom of the stalk to the first leaf,

they're ready to eat. If you don't need all your celery at once, cut off individual stalks from the outside in.

Outer stalks tend to be greener and stronger in flavor (especially if they haven't been blanched) whereas inner stalks, with the natural blanching provided by the outer stalks, are lighter and sweeter. You can also harvest the entire plant at once.

While celery has a reputation as a fickle plant to grow, it's pretty easy once you understand exactly what it needs in order to thrive. Celery leaves can add pep to a salad or pasta. The stalks make perfect afternoon snacks for your kids, and you can also try your hand at making gumbo or jambalaya with your fragrant garden celery.

Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners via email at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.