

GROWING STEVIA



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Question: I learned about an interesting plant called stevia which is 300 times sweeter than sugar but without the calories. Can this plant be grown in the Umpqua Valley?

Answer: If growing your own calorie-free, natural sweetener sounds too good to be true, it's time to get to know stevia.

While the stevia plant may look like a plant from the mint family, it's actually part of the sunflower family (Asteraceae). Native to Paraguay and other tropical areas of the Americas, the stevia plant (*Stevia rebaudiana*) produces leaves packed with super-sweet compounds that remain stable even after the leaves have been dried.

Stevia leaves have been used to sweeten teas and beverages throughout South America for centuries. More recently many have turned to stevia to reduce their sugar intake because, unlike honey, maple syrup, agave or molasses, this natural sweetener has zero calories.

Stevia is especially well-suited for sweetening drinks, fruits, salad dressings, yogurt and most creamy desserts. Stevia can substitute for some, but not all, of the sugar used when baking.

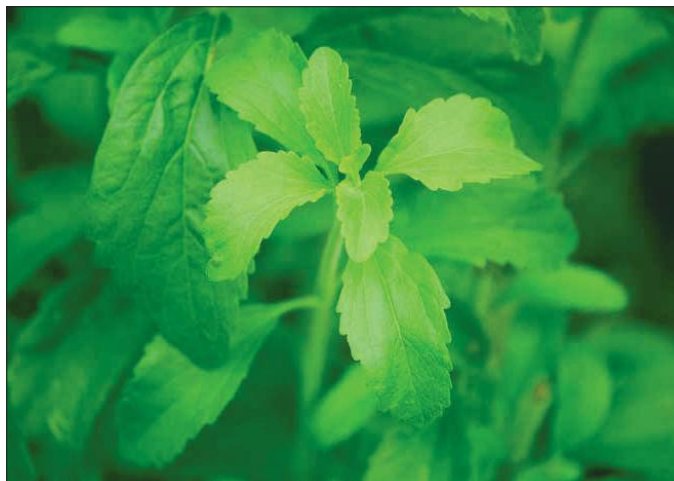
Stevia is best started from seed. Seeds should be started indoors eight to 10 weeks before transplanting outside. Place one to three seeds in each cell and lightly cover with fine potting soil or vermiculite 1/8 inch thick. Spritz or mist with water to the keep seed bed moist.

Germination of stevia seeds tends to be spotty. Make sure to place your growing bed in a warm and bright spot inside your home to optimize the germination rate. Seedlings should emerge in seven to 14 days.

You can order your stevia seeds online or buy them from your local garden center.

Make sure that your stevia plants are at least 6 inches tall before transplanting them outside. The bigger your seedlings are, the better they will be able to survive. Make sure that the climatic conditions are just right for transplanting your stevia seedlings outdoors.

Right means that there will be no more spring frosts since your stevia seedlings are sensitive to the cold and may die if outside temperatures



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Stevia leaves have been used to sweeten teas and beverages throughout South America for centuries. The super-sweet compounds found in the leaves remain stable even after the leaves have been dried.



COURTESY OF NC STATE EXTENSION

Stevia plants grow 1-3 feet tall and roughly as wide. Around three months after you planted your seeds, your stevia plants will be ready to harvest.



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The best time to harvest your stevia is just before your plants flower.

are too low.

Stevia is best grown in a well-drained soil or in large containers. Ensure good drainage in containers by using a light textured potting mix

and use containers with large drainage holes.

Add compost or organic matter into the soil if growing in the garden.

Skip the chemical fertilizers, which

can cause lush growth with lower amounts of sweetness. Over fertilized plants are also more prone to disease.

Consistent soil moisture is essential. Organic mulch can help keep soil moisture even. Good air circulation is important for growing stevia. Give your plants room to grow.

Plants grow 1-3 feet tall and roughly as wide. Use a one foot or larger diameter pot or space plants 18 inches apart in garden beds. Plant in full sun with over 15 hours of light preferred to maximize vegetative growth. In areas with hot summers, light afternoon shade is beneficial.

While stevia grows best in soils with a soil pH between 6.5 and 7, it is also quite tolerant to lower or higher soil pH as long as it is not too far off the scale.

Stevia plants may overwinter in hardiness zones 8 or higher. For colder climates, bring plants inside before a hard frost if you want to keep them from year to year. A well-tended stevia plant may produce for three to five years or more.

To maximize leaf production, you can trim back the plants several times to induce branching, first when plants are about 8 inches tall and again in early summer.

Around three months after you planted your seeds, your stevia plants will be ready to harvest. The best time to harvest your stevia is just before your plants flower. When the time has come, just cut off the stems you want to harvest from your stevia plants. Removing whole stems from your stevia plants is much easier compared to just harvesting single leaves. It is also more convenient since it makes the drying process much simpler.

You can just let your stevia stems dry. For that, just form small stevia bundles and hang them top-down for a few days. Store dried stevia leaves in an airtight container in a cool, dark place. Wait until you're ready to use stevia leaves to crush them.

If you've been thinking of trying something new in the garden, or you use a lot of stevia and would like to save some money by growing your own, give these plants a try.

This vigorous tender perennial is used in many parts of the world in place of artificial sweeteners. Use fresh, dried, powdered or as a liquid to sweeten a variety of foods and beverages.

Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.