Parsnips are grown under similar conditions as carrots. Do not use fresh manure or nitrogen fertilizer in the parsnip bed. Rich soils cause roots to fork and become hairy. Soil, which was manured well the previous year, is the best place for parsnips. Wait until the soil is dry enough to form a clodless growing medium. Till or spade the bed deeply (12-16 inches) to allow roots to elongate and develop full size. Do not step on or near the bed at any time until harvest.

Always sow fresh seeds. Parsnips need a long growing season (110 to 130 days). Plant parsnip seeds directly into the garden between late April and mid-July. Soak the seeds for 24 hours before planting. Sow seeds about 2 inch apart, ½ to ¾ inch deep, in rows at least 12 inches apart (space plants 6 to 8 inches apart in both directions for wide row planting). Cover seed with vermiculite, or commercial seed starting mix, to ensure good germination. Parsnips are slow to germinate and the soil needs to be kept moist. The seedlings are weak and won't push through crusted soil. Old timers sometimes plant radish seed in the furrow with parsnips to mark the rows and help break the soil surface for the slower growing parsnips.

Cultivar Selection

Parsnips are bred for flavor, smooth long roots and canker resistance. Lancer, Harris Model, Andover and All America are recommended cultivars.

Seed Specifications

Minimum germination standard: 75%. Usual seed life: 3 years. Approximately 55-115 seeds per 1/2 gram (average 90 seeds), about 110-230 seeds per gram.
Irrigation

Water the garden to provide uniform moisture supply to the crop. Water the garden sufficiently to moisten the soil to a depth of 6 inches (approximately 1 ½ inches).

Fertility

Parsnips require very little nitrogen, so fertilize cautiously. Apply small amounts of nitrogen, moderate amounts of phosphorous and generous amount of potassium. To fertilize, use 4 pounds of 5-10-10 or 2 pounds of 10-10-10 per hundred square feet of garden as a preplant fertilizer. The optimum pH range for parsnips is 5.5 to 7.0.

Harvest

Parsnips mature in about 16 weeks. Considered a winter vegetable because its flavor is not fully developed until the roots have been exposed to near-freezing temperatures for 2 to 4 weeks in the fall and early winter. The starch in the root then changes into sugar, resulting in a strong, sweet, unique, nut-like flavor. Where winters are very severe, cover the rows with 6 inches of straw to keep the soil from freezing and make lifting easier.

Store at 34°F and 100% humidity. Parsnip roots add delicious celery flavor to soups and stews.

Pests and Diseases

Parsnips are relatively free of both insects and diseases. Using crop row covers until tops are 3-4 inches tall can reliably control insects. Use cultivars resistant to parsnip canker where possible. Boron deficiency may occasionally be troublesome. Parsnips are sometimes bothered by celery blight. Keeping the plants well watered will help avoid this problem.