

CHICORY

This multi-use plant is not commonly grown by amateur gardeners, but it is reasonably easy to grow. Its leaves, roots and chicons can be used:

- A crop of leaves is produced from early summer to mid-autumn (8 weeks plant to harvest time) makes a delightful addition to salads.
- The roots, particularly of the Witloof variety, can be lifted and stored in a dark place they will produce chicons, a delicacy in winter months (32 weeks plant to harvest time).
- Roots can be baked, ground and made into a delicious hot drink OR used as a coffee substitute (40:60 ratio mixture with coffee).

Chicory prefers a light well dug soil which is reasonably fertile. It can be grown in full sun or partial shade. It's a good crop for growing between rows of peas and sweet corn. At the beginning of the season the chicory will get full sun. As the season progresses the growing peas / sweet corn will shade the chicory from the full sun.

Chicory for Leaves:

If sowing seed directly into the soil outside the best time is late spring onwards. Sow seed outside in to a depth of about 1½cm deep and cover with fine soil. Water in well if the soil is dry. If sowing more than one row, space the rows 35cm apart. When the seedlings are about 2cm high, thin them to 25cm apart.

If sowing seed under cover, start sowing in mid spring. Sow a couple of seed per pot and thin out to the strongest. When the seedlings are 5cm high transplant them to their final position in the garden. Avoid disturbing the roots as much as possible. If the seeds are sown in degradable pots the pot can be planted directly into the soil. Space them as described in the previous paragraph. Water in well.

Chicory for Chicons:

It is best to sow chicory seed for chicons in pots indoors as described above. Sow the seed in late spring. Plant out as described above.

CARE FOR CHICORY

Chicory requires no care whatsoever once the seedlings have established. In the early stages, water if conditions become dry. Thereafter the plants will look after themselves. Their long tap roots will search out water in all but the driest of conditions. Chicory will smother all but the most troublesome weeds.

Sometimes chicory does throw up a few flowers. As soon as you notice them cut the flowering stems back to soil level.

If you want to blanch the leaves (make them whiter rather than greener) then simply tie a piece

of string round the leaves, drawing them together slightly. This will prevent light from reaching many of the inner leaves thus blanching them. This works best with radicchio and sugarloaf types of chicory. The best time to blanch is about ten days before you to harvest the leaves. Much longer and the plants will begin to suffer. As a further guide, begin blanching the plants about 12 weeks after the seeds are sown.

HARVESTING CHICORY

Chicory for Leaves

If you are growing chicory for its leaves then they will be ready for harvest when a good 'heart' has formed. The chicory will be about 30/45cm high when it is ready for harvest.

Pull the chicory plant, roots and all, gently from the soil. Chop off the roots and throw them onto the compost heap. Chicory leaves keep very well in the fridge, they stay crisp much longer than lettuce.

Chicory for Chicons

It is possible to force chicory to produce chicons whilst it is left in the soil. To do this, cut the stem and leaves off leaving just a 5cm stem. Draw the soil up around the stem to just cover it. The chicons will grow off the root under the soil and will be ready for harvest in two to three weeks.

The best way to force chicons to grow though is to remove the plants from the ground and force them in a cool greenhouse or shed. Forcing chicory is slightly more complicated than normal but if you get it right then chicons can be yours for the eating from early December through to mid-February.

If you lift chicory and force them all at once you will end up with a glut of this tasty vegetable. It's best to force them over a two to three month period. To do this you will need to dig up the roots, prepare them for storage and then force them, a few at a time, as needed.

Cooking and Storing

Blanched chicory is not bitter and can be used directly in salads. Radicchio doesn't need blanching and its red leaves look and taste great in late autumn and winter salads.

Chicory grown without blanching is best steamed and served with a knob of butter.

Chicons can be eaten uncooked in salads. They can also be braised with either bacon or encased in ham parcels.

Pests and Diseases

Chicory is a fast growing strong vegetable and resists most pests and diseases. Where it is grown in damp conditions it may suffer from rotting and decaying leaves. The solution is not to plant chicory in damp stagnant areas of the garden.

The only other problem they can occasionally suffer from is the dreaded slug. Chicory and radicchio are not the slugs favourite but they do eat them sometimes.