



Caraway in the Garden

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Summary

Caraway (*Carum carvi*) is a biennial plant, closely related to carrot and parsley, which requires two growing seasons to produce seed. Some varieties can produce seed the following summer if fall planted. Caraway prefers cool temperate conditions. Sow seeds in a sunny location of the garden in well-drained soil, rich in organic matter. Caraway's leaves can be harvested throughout the first growing season and its root is similar to a parsnip. During the first year, plants usually grow about 8 inches tall and produce a long taproot. It then overwinters and flowers from May to August on 12 to 24-inch-tall stalks. A month after flowering the seeds turn dark brown and are harvested. The anise-like flavored seeds are commonly used in desserts, breads, and casseroles.

Varieties

There are few named caraway varieties and all will grow throughout Utah. In areas prone to harsh winter temperatures, use mulch to protect the plants against frost damage.

How to Grow

Soils: Caraway grows best in rich, well drained soils with a pH of 6-7.5. In heavy silty clay or clay soils, incorporate compost into the area to improve soil structure. If using raised beds or containers, make sure they are 12 or more inches deep to accommodate the caraway's long taproot and provide adequate drainage. Be sure to get a soil test completed so you know what nutrients are needed in the garden.

Soil Preparation: Before planting, prepare a uniform, even seedbed. Caraway likes rich, fertile soil so incorporate 2-4 inches of compost into the soil. Otherwise, apply and incorporate the equivalent of 4-6 tablespoons of an all-purpose fertilizer (16-16-8) per 10

square feet of garden area. Rake the ground to loosen up the soil prior to sowing seed.

Plants: Caraway does not transplant well because of its long taproot and biennial growth habit. Sow the seed directly in the garden as soon as the soil is dry enough to be worked in the spring or fall. Caraway easily reseeds, so remove unwanted seed heads to eliminate the spread of unwanted plants.

Planting and Spacing: Plant caraway in a location that receives 6-8 hours of full sun but in a place they can over-winter. Plant the seeds ¼-½ deep, 4-6 inches apart in early spring or fall and space rows 12 inches apart. Seeds are slow to germinate, so keep bed moist and free of weeds until seedlings are established. Thin plants when they are 2-4 inches high, spacing them 12 inches apart in the row.

Mulches: Grass clippings, straw or other organic mulches should be applied around plants after they become established. Mulches conserve and maintain soil moisture, help to keep soil cool, and reduce weed competition. Since caraway readily reseeds, mulches can hinder germination and limit the spread of unwanted plants. In cold locations, mulching protects over-wintering plants from damage.

Companion Planting: Because caraway is a biennial (grows one year, flowers the next year, then dies), it can be intercropped with most annual vegetables, such as beans or peas.

Irrigation: Water plants regularly but do not over water (1-1.5 inches per week), allowing soils to dry-out between irrigations. Irrigate more often as temperatures increase in the summer and particularly during seed set. If using overhead watering, irrigate early in the day.

Fertilization: Like most herbs, caraway does not require supplemental fertilization if soils are prepared as recommended. For plants grown in containers, use a liquid fertilizer at half strength about every 4 weeks. If growth appears weak, side-dress plants with aged compost or with one tablespoon of nitrogen fertilizer/10 sq. ft. of growing area, midway through the growing season.

Problems

Weeds: Hand weed around young plants during establishment. Once established, caraway will out-compete most weeds. Cultivate shallowly to avoid root damage if weeds are a problem. Caraway may become a weed in the garden, as it readily reseeds. Thinning out unwanted plants and applying a heavy layer of mulch should reduce both seed load and germination. Pinching off unwanted seed heads may allow the plant to grow an extra season.

Insects and Disease: Caraway is not prone to insect or disease damage.

Harvest and Storage

Productivity: All plant parts are edible. Harvest individual leaves when plants reach 6 inches tall for salads or a garnish. Leave enough leaves to allow for continued healthy growth since flowers develop the second season. Once the plant starts to flower, leaves lose flavor as the seeds develop. Store leaves in a plastic bag in the refrigerator for up to two weeks. The roots can be harvested late in the first year and prepared like parsnips or carrots. Harvest seed heads (umbels) when they start to turn brown by cutting the stalks at ground level. If left to dry in the garden, seed heads often shatter, scattering seeds before they are collected. Tie the flower stalks together, enclose the umbels in a paper bag, and hang in a warm dry area to cure the seeds. The dry seeds will fall from the seed heads into the bag where they can be collected. Seeds retain their flavor for up to one year if stored in an airtight container away from heat and light.

Uses and Nutrition: Leaves or roots are used in salads, stews, and sauces. Caraway leaves and roots are a very good source of dietary fiber and are high in vitamin C. The anise-like flavored seeds are commonly used in desserts, breads and casseroles. Plant parts contain high levels of calcium, iron, phosphorus, potassium, magnesium, zinc, copper and manganese.

Frequently Asked Questions

I planted lots of seeds, but very few germinated. What can I do to improve caraway emergence? Caraway seed are slow to germinate much like carrots and parsnips. Germination may take 7-14 days at 70° F and plants may not emerge for 2-3 weeks. In the garden, keep the soil surface moist to aid proper germination and emergence. Or try placing seeds in moist paper towels in a warm location. After germination, plant the sprouted seeds in the garden or growing containers.

Will caraway produce seed the first growing season? No. Biennial plants require chilling to flower, so flowering normally happens the second year. You can shorten the growing time by planting caraway in the early fall. Be sure to mulch these young plants to protect from winter damage.

Sources

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