

Belgian Endive

Force yourself some culinary luxury

BY AURELIA C. SCOTT



I'll share a secret with you. Belgian endives, those expensive, lime-tipped torpedoes found in the specialty vegetable section of the supermarket, are easily grown in the home garden. But don't tell anyone because growing your own seems such a remarkable feat that it impresses friends and enhances your gardening reputation. And that, as we all know, is especially important on those days when you head out to the garden to cut the evening's broccoli raab only to find it has succumbed to flea beetles.

Belgian endive (*Cichorium intybus*) is a member of the chicory family, a group of slightly bitter greens that includes escarole, radicchio, and curly-headed chicory. In Europe and Great Britain, where it has been grown by market and home gardeners for at least 200 years, Belgian endive is often called witloof, which is Flemish for "white leaf," a reference to the blanched, second-stage leaves of the plant.

Many chicories can be grown in the garden like lettuce; however, producing blanched Belgian endive sprouts, which are referred to as chicons, is a two-step process of first growing, then forcing the plant to produce more leaf growth. Don't let the thought of two steps deter you, for as I said, growing Belgian endive is easy. You need just three things: 1) deeply dug soil to grow long roots; 2) patience, because most of your time will be spent doing nothing; and 3) an old nursery pot to force the final result—crisp, pale chicons.

Prepare the Soil for Easy Root Growth

The goal of the growing season is to produce thick, healthy roots from which chicons can be forced. Therefore, the most important step is the first one: preparing the bed. I garden in raised beds, but even if you choose to grow Belgian endive in flat beds, the soil should be deep, friable, and fertile, similar to

the soil in which you grow carrots. So similar, in fact, that Belgian endive and carrots make good companion plants.

First, double dig the bed you have selected. If your body rebels at the thought of removing topsoil, digging deep into the subsoil, and replacing topsoil, at least take the time to loosen the ground to a depth of 12 in. Second, turn in as much compost and composted manure as you can. Ideally, 3 in. to 5 in. of organic matter should be spread over the bed and turned under. Additional fertilizer is not necessary, although you should add lime if your soil is strongly acidic; Belgian endive grows well in soil with a pH of 5.5 or higher. Finally, rake the bed smooth.

Planting and Tending the Crop

Like carrots and parsnips, Belgian endive requires a long season, up to 140 days. Most of that time is spent growing slowly in cool soil; for that reason, and because Belgian endive survives light frosts, short-season gardeners should not be

deterred. I garden in the foothills of the New Mexican Rocky Mountains where the growing season varies from 88 to 105 days and late-June freezes are not unknown, yet my Belgian endive has never failed.

Plant after the soil has warmed to 50°F. This is important because while Belgian endive will survive cold during the growing season, it needs warm soil to germinate. I plant seed around the second or third week of May in a bed I have warmed for a week under clear plastic. Seed the Belgian endive using your preferred method for planting root crops. I broadcast the seed across 15-in.-wide beds; rows spaced 12 in. apart also work. Keep the soil moist until the seed germinates.

As they grow, thin the seedlings to stand 6 in. apart. I hate thinning, but I have learned the hard way that it is the most important step in growing Belgian endive. Unthinned, it produces scrawny, twisted roots from which only scrawny chicons can be forced.

Belgian endive is sometimes called witloof,



The goal of the first phase: Get healthy roots (above) that will support the second stage of growth, the chicons. Cut the leafy greens down to an inch of growth (center top) before starting the next phase.



Set roots upright in a pot, about 2 in. apart; make sure the potting medium reaches the crowns of the roots. Water thoroughly. Cover the roots and pot so they remain dark. Place in a cool location.



Store the de-leaved roots you're not potting up immediately in dampened soil medium.

After thinning, mulch the plants with 1 in. to 2 in. of organic matter, such as straw or salt marsh hay, to preserve moisture and reduce weeds. Thereafter, water only in very dry conditions. This is the time for patience because there is nothing left to do until harvest.

Root Treatment

Begin harvesting when the Belgian endive roots are about 7 in. long and 1 in. wide at the top. The leaves should be as tall as romaine lettuce. Depending on location, the harvesting date will fall between late September and early November. Carefully dig the roots with a garden fork. Then cut the leaves down to a 1-in. stub (top center photo, facing page).

Sort the roots and dispose of any whose tops are not at least 1 in. in diameter. The width of the root determines the thickness of the chicon, so be brave and toss the skinny little ones in the compost, where they will help feed next year's crop. Pick

out a few roots to force immediately because by this time you are bound to be impatient for the taste of Belgian endive.

Store the rest of the roots as you would store carrots for the winter. I use a wooden wine-bottle crate or a plastic storage bin with holes drilled in the cover; perforated plastic bags or plastic-lined burlap bags also work well. Lay the roots horizontally in layers in dampened sand, peat moss, or sawdust. Put the container of roots in a place that stays just above freezing—an unheated garage, basement, barn, root cellar, or if you have only a few roots, the refrigerator. Do not store Belgian endive above 45° F or it will sprout.

Forcing Chicons Is the Fun Part

This is the amazing part of the process. When you're ready to begin producing chicons, take several roots out of storage and set them upright, 2 in. apart, in a deep nursery pot or lined cardboard box (bottom center photo, facing page). Add soil or

which is Flemish for 'white leaf.'



In three to four weeks, the Belgian endive should be about 5 in. tall and ready to harvest. Cut the green-tipped chicons off just above the root crown. Preparing the chicons for use is simple—wipe them with a dampened towel and trim the root end.



Whether you say EN-dive or ahn-DEEV, this delectable vegetable has two stages of growth: roots and verdant leaves, then torpedo-shape chicons.

soiless mix up to the root crowns. Water thoroughly. Cover completely with a larger pot or box and store in a location that is both cool (55° to 68°F) and dark; the chicons must grow in darkness or they will be inedibly bitter. I force chicons in the closet of our chilly guest room, unless we have guests, in which case I use the cold back hall and cover the whole thing with a clean, overturned plastic trash bin.

Resist the urge to monitor your crop daily. Instead, check weekly to make sure the soil stays moist. In three to four weeks, the chicons should be 5 in. tall. Cut them off just above the root crown and carry them proudly to the kitchen.

These same roots will produce a second, smaller harvest if stored again in total darkness. Or start over with new roots. Just make sure you always have a pot of Belgian endive forcing in the closet, at the ready to bring forth and impress gardening friends who have no idea how easy this delicacy is to grow.

Aurelia Scott is fortunate enough to tend two gardens, one in Portland, Maine, and the other in Arroyo Seco, New Mexico.

BELGIAN ENDIVE CULTURE

- Plant in friable, fertile soil, after the ground has warmed to 50° F.
- Broadcast the seed across 15-in.-wide beds, or space rows 12 in. apart; keep seeds evenly moist.
- Thin seedlings to stand 6 in. apart.
- Mulch around the plants with 1 in. to 2 in. of organic matter.
- Water only when very dry.
- Harvest when the roots are 1 in. wide at the top and about 7 in. long, sometime between late September and early November.
- To force, set roots upright, 2 in. apart in a deep pot or lined cardboard box. Add soil or soiless mix up to the root crowns. Water thoroughly. Cover with a larger pot and store in a location that is 55° to 68° F and dark.
- Check weekly to make sure the soil stays moist.
- Harvest when the chicons are about 5 in. tall, cutting them off just above the root crown.

Grilled Endive with Blue Cheese Dressing

4 servings

Belgian endive's delicate, mildly bitter flavor lends itself to many recipes. It is delicious braised, baked, or grilled, or used raw in salads and as scoops for dips.

2 to 4 large Belgian endive chicons

2 Tbs. olive oil

Salt and pepper

Blue cheese dressing, at room temperature

Light the charcoal or preheat the gas grill. Slice the chicons in half lengthwise. Pour the olive oil in a shallow bowl and roll the chicon halves in the oil until they are completely coated. Salt and pepper lightly.

Put the chicons onto the edge of the hot grill, cut side down. Close the grill and cook the chicons for 10 to 15 min. or until they are tender and a bit charred around the edges.

Place the chicons on plates, pour your favorite blue cheese dressing over them, and serve.

Winter Vegetable Plate with Garlic-Parsley Sauce

4 servings

- 4 large beets**
- 2 Tbs. olive oil**
- ½ cup chicken stock**
- 4 large Belgian endive chicons, halved lengthwise**
- 4 carrots, peeled and cut into large chunks**
- 4 medium red-skinned or Yukon Gold potatoes, quartered**
- 2 medium onions, peeled and quartered**
- Salt**
- ½ tsp. thyme**
- 16-20 large white mushrooms**



Winter Vegetable Plate

Sauce

- 3 large cloves garlic**
- ¾ cup chopped parsley**
- ¼ tsp. coarse salt**
- ½ to ¾ cup olive oil**
- Chopped zest of half a lemon**
- Red wine vinegar**

For the sauce: Purée the garlic, parsley, and salt with a little of the olive oil. Stir in the rest of the oil, lemon zest, and vinegar to taste. Let the sauce sit at room temperature while you roast the vegetables.

Preheat the oven to 450°F. Rub the beets with a small amount of the olive oil and

bake for 40 min. Remove them from the oven, cool, and peel. This process can be done up to 3 days ahead of time.

In a medium sauté pan, bring the chicken stock to a low boil. Place the halved chicons in the stock and braise for 10 min. Set aside.

Toss the carrots, potatoes, and onions in a shallow baking dish with the remaining olive oil, salt, and thyme. Bake for 20 min., stirring occasionally.

When the vegetables are almost done, add the mushrooms, baked beets, and braised chicons to the baking dish and roast for another 10 min., or until all the vegetables are brown on the outside and tender inside.

Arrange the roasted vegetables on four plates. Drizzle the sauce over the vegetables.

NOTE: These vegetables are delicious served with extra-sharp cheddar cheese, country brown bread, and butter.

Endive, Beet, and Pecan Salad

4 servings

- 4 medium or 8 small beets**
- 2 tsp. olive oil**
- 3 large endive chicons**
- 4 tsp. balsamic vinegar**
- ¼ to ½ cup halved pecans**
- 2 Tbs. chopped fresh mixed herbs, like basil, oregano, parsley, tarragon**
- Salt and pepper**

Preheat the oven to 450°F. Rub the beets with a small amount of the olive oil and bake for 40 min. Allow the beets to cool, then peel and quarter them.

Quarter the chicons lengthwise and arrange three pieces on each salad plate. Scatter the beets over the chicons. Drizzle with the balsamic vinegar and the rest of the oil. Sprinkle the pecans and herbs on top of the vegetables. Add salt and pepper to taste.



Endive, Beet, and Pecan Salad