

Three stalks of celery are arranged vertically on a light-colored wooden surface. The stalk on the left is cut lengthwise, revealing its internal structure. The middle stalk is whole, and the stalk on the right is also whole but slightly thicker. The word 'Celery' is written in large, white, bold letters across the top of the stalks.

Celery

Everything you wanted to know about
these fabulously crunchy sticks

Celery

Celery {*apium graveolans*}

A bushy, mounded plant that grows wild in Europe, celery needs deep, fertile soil, plenty of water and sunshine as well as a long growing season complete with cool nights to grow into top tasting plants with a satisfying crunch. The rich, moist Fen soils of East Anglia are ideally suited for this task with G's, the largest celery producer in Europe with over 60 years' experience in growing this challenging crop, producing a total of 1,000 ha (the equivalent of 1,500 football fields) in the area.

Seasons

Celery planting starts at the end of February with harvesting (depending on the weather) starting in early June and finishing in early November. At its quickest growing rate celery takes just 11 weeks from planting to mature into a crop ready for harvest.

Harvest and delivery

Celery is still all harvested by hand in the open field using a special shaped knife – cutting by machine just doesn't give the same quality of product. G's celery is cut, selected and packed in the field on purpose-built mobile packhouses called 'rigs'. The finished product is then brought back from the field to the farm centre within a target time of 3 hours after which it is kept in temperature-controlled conditions for maximum freshness until it reaches the supermarket depot about a day later.

Celery Products

You will find three main types of celery product for sale:

- Whole head – coarse outer stalks and leaf tops removed. Use the outer stems for cooking and the more tender, inner stalks for eating raw.
- Hearts – more of the outer stalks have been removed, so there is less waste.
- Sticks – celery sticks, pre washed and ready to eat.

Cooking, eating and preparation

Like all vegetables, celery is best eaten as fresh as possible, but should last for 1-2 weeks in the fridge depending on the time of year (longer in summer). To revive celery that's gone a bit limp, trim a small amount off the root end and stand the sticks in lukewarm water for half an hour or so. The cut ends of celery can go a bit white – this is due to oxidisation of the cut cells and is a natural healing process. Just slice off the white bits and you're good to go.

To prepare celery for cooking and eating, simply separate and wash the stalks and then:

- Cut lengthways into sticks for dipping
- Slice thin or thick for salads, stir fries and soups
- Cut diagonally into 8cm (3") pieces for casseroles, baking and braising
- Halve or quarter lengthways for braising or roasting with poultry or meat

And don't forget, celery leaves, which are full of flavour, can be used like a herb in salads or as a garnish.



Serving celery with style

Guy Shropshire, who founded G's 60 years ago, is very particular about how to serve celery - he insists this is the best way to enjoy it!

First, remove a few of the outer stalks from a head of celery and reserve for stocks or soups. Trim the base into a point (like a pencil), being careful to keep as much of the white root as possible – many think that is the best bit. Wash carefully and then quarter the celery lengthways, making sure each quarter has its own section of root, and then stand in a celery vase or tall jug of cold water and serve at the end of the meal with a selection of Stilton (or other cheeses), salt, nuts, biscuits and bread. And don't forget the port!

Types of celery

Celery comes in a number of varieties in addition to the most well-known variety found in all supermarkets:

Traditional Celery

Today's 'apple-green' celery, which is available year round, is a direct descendant from the traditional wide-row winter celery and varieties have been carefully selected to maintain the traditional taste. The modern product also has a better appearance and keeping qualities.

Fenland Celery

In Victorian times winter celery, specially grown in the Fens for the Christmas market (usually available from mid-November to New Year's Day, depending on the weather) was extremely popular.

It was grown in very wide rows as the black Fen soil had to be banked up around the celery to protect it from frost and 'blanche' it, which is how it came to be called 'white' celery.

This traditional method, which is very labour-intensive, gives the celery a unique 'nutty-sweet' taste. It has been revived in recent years by G's – visit our Fenland Celery site for more information.

Celery has been used for thousands of years, although at first more for medicinal purposes than for cooking.

The Middle Ages

Early types of celery were very bitter and it was mostly regarded as a medicinal plant from classical times through to the Middle Ages, when it was used to treat anxiety, insomnia, rheumatism, gout, toothache and arthritis. Around the 15th century, when it was known as 'smallage', a sweeter, more tender variety was developed and it began to be enjoyed as a vegetable in its own right.

19th – 20th century

In the 19th century farmers in the East Anglian Fens began to harvest celery around September, which they prolonged into the colder months (to get a better price) by covering it with soil – 'earthing up' - to protect it from frost. Celery's popularity grew during Victorian times and it became a traditional salad vegetable to accompany the cheese board served at the end of meals over the Christmas period.

However the season for Fenland winter celery was by its nature short and unpredictable, and people wanted more of it - for longer.



Modern Celery

About 50 years ago varieties were introduced that could be blanched without being earthed up, by planting the rows close together. They were also resistant to bolting to seed, so could be planted earlier. This paler 'white' celery was then available from July but the taste and shelf life of the old varieties had largely been lost. Its reputation was further damaged by poor tasting celery imported in the winter season.

Celery Today

Fashions change in food as in everything else and over the years, green celery became more popular than the traditional white variety. In the last 25 or so years new varieties and growing techniques have been developed to achieve the desired 'salad eating' taste and appearance, selecting varieties with the best flavour and growing characteristics. The greener varieties related to the old Fenland varieties won through this selection process hands down and by happy coincidence also had better keeping qualities. So green celery, now available all year round, is a direct descendant of the traditional celery.



Health

Celery has long been regarded as an ideal food for those trying to manage their weight due to its low calorie status and high water content, however it's a good source of potassium and high in calcium too – which is important for healthy bones, blood pressure and nerve function.

What's more, choosing to snack on celery also guarantees a fabulous amount of antioxidants – it's packed with Vitamin C, Potassium and Iron, and provides a good dose of folate too. And don't forget the leaves either, and the darker the better, as they contain carotene and more minerals and Vitamin C than the paler leaves. To top it all off, celery is low sodium and cholesterol free as well as being virtually fat free too, but if you need any more reasons to eat celery, simply read on...

Calorie-wise, 1 digestive biscuit equals 30 sticks of celery!

It's one of the lowest calorie foods you can eat

Celery is extremely low in calories - 1 stalk contains just 2 calories – and is virtually fat free, making it a great snack or ingredient for slimmers.

Helps you feel fuller for longer

Celery's high water and fibre content and crunchy texture are not only brilliant for helping you feel satisfied, but also for getting you to chew your food well and ensuring you stay fuller for longer.

Keeps bloating at bay

As well as containing fibre, celery is a prebiotic so can help keep bloating at bay.

Reduces blood pressure

Celery is a good source of potassium which helps to control blood pressure and counteract the negative effects of too much salt on the diet. It also contains '3-n-butyl phthalide' which helps to reduce blood pressure by relaxing blood vessels and incidentally is one of the components that gives celery its characteristic smell and taste. Traditionally used in Asian medicine to treat high blood pressure, more recently studies have found that celery seed extract can help reduce both systolic and diastolic blood pressure within weeks.

Helps maintain a healthy digestive system

Celery contains dietary fibre which helps keep your digestive system healthy. A high fibre diet will protect against problems like heart disease, diabetes, constipation and haemorrhoids (piles).

May help slow progression of dementia

Recent research indicates that the plant compound luteolin - found in celery - may help combat Alzheimer's and other degenerative mental illnesses. This is because luteolin reduces age-related inflammation in the brain and related memory deficits by directly inhibiting the release of inflammatory molecules in the brain. Research is still in the early stages, but it is known that a healthy balanced diet, rich in fruit and vegetables, can help reduce the risk of dementia.

May help protect against cancer

One of active compounds in celery is the phytochemical coumarin, which has been proven effective in cancer prevention and capable of enhancing the activity of certain white blood cells that help fight



cancer. They also help prevent free radicals from damaging cells. In addition, the plant compound luteolin which is found in celery has been shown to function as an anti-oxidant, anti-inflammatory, and anti-cancer agent with a study assessing [the role of diet in the development of colon cancer](#) finding a strong protective effect from luteolin.

Aids a good night's sleep

Blended celery juice is thought to help a good night's sleep because of the vitamins, mineral salts and nutrients it contains. For a refreshing Grape & Celery Cooler, juice a bunch of white dessert grapes with two stalks of celery and top with fresh mint leaves. Celery also combines well with apples, pears and radishes – see our fruity juice recipe for details.

Fun Facts

1. Urban Myths - Celery has negative calories i.e. it takes more calories to eat a piece of celery than the celery has in it to begin with. We hate to admit it, but this is a myth! It doesn't stop celery being a seriously healthy snack though thanks to its high water content and low sodium, cholesterol and calorie status – 2 stalks of celery contain just 25 calories.
2. Relax - In traditional Oriental medicine celery was used to treat hypertension. This is because phthalide compounds in celery can act as a sedative as well as lower blood pressure.
3. Food on film - Farmer and television presenter Jimmy Doherty visited G's farms to try his hand (literally) at harvesting celery for his 2008 programme, "Jimmy's Farming Heroes".
4. Sweet dreams - Celery is thought to promote a good night's sleep because of the vitamins, mineral salts and nutrients it contains. It is also thought to have a calming effect on the central nervous system.
5. Celery flavoured fizz – Forget celery juice and start drinking celery soda: Dr Brown's started making their Cel-Ray tonic in America back in 1868 (although the name came along later) and it's still in production. You might have to go to the States to try it though...We're also told there was even a celery Jell-O flavour at one time. Only in America!
6. Food of love? Celery has a formidable reputation as an aphrodisiac, going back to Roman times (they dedicated the plant to Pluto, god of sex and hell!). While Madame de Pompadour, official chief mistress of French King Louis XV, swore by celery and truffle soup washed down with hot chocolate. And even in the enlightened 1990's a TV programme about Millennium babies recommended that couples eat plenty of celery to ensure they didn't miss the deadline!
7. Hangover cure – Another use of celery by the Roman's was to use it as an antidote against the intoxicating effects of wine and the ensuing headache by wearing wreaths of celery leaves.
8. Bottoms up! - The Bloody Mary cocktail was invented in the 1920's at Harry's New York Bar in Paris. However it wasn't until the 1960's that celery was associated with the drink, when a guest at a Chicago hotel was given a Bloody Mary but nothing to stir it with. He improvised with a stick of celery from the buffet!
9. Greek's Gold - Winners of athletic events in Ancient Greece were presented with bunches of celery, much as flowers are given today.
10. Pure cure - Although celery has been used for thousands of years, at first it was valued more for medicinal purposes than for cooking. Wild celery was used in the Middle Ages to treat anxiety, insomnia, rheumatism, gout and arthritis. While in Classical times it was believed to purify the blood.
11. Food for thought – Celery was first used as a food in Italy during the 16th century, later spreading across Europe as a flavouring for soups, meats and stews.
12. Celebrity fans – Actress Anna Friel is a fan of celery in liquid form, opting to juice it with beetroot and dandelion leaves. Singer Katie Perry loves celery dipped in ranch dressing, demanding it as part of her backstage rider. While Top Gear presenter, Richard Hammond, says the only change he has noticed since his near-fatal 280 mph crash in 2006, is that he now likes celery!
13. It's crunch time – Celery is stringy because of its cell structure – the cell walls are tougher to help keep the plant upright, and that's what gives celery its crunch.



What the Experts Say

It's sometimes hard to think of celery as anything more than a comedy vessel for cream or blue cheese in some kind of retro canapé. Yet there's so much to this deeply savoury kitchen staple that's worth exploring.

Joanna Weinberg, The Times

Celery has such a lot going for it as a raw ingredient in salads, and because of that we rather forget how good it is cooked and served as a vegetable.”

Delia Smith

We need celery in the kitchen like we need salt and onions; few braises succeed unless celery is included in the mirepoix, the chopped vegetable mixture that kickstarts the scent of a bubbling stew.

Rose Prince, Telegraph

We chop it up for salads which is great, its stem is a natural dipper and it is the perfect accompaniment for cheese. After each taste of cheese it's great to crunch down on fibrous but juicy celery stalks. They are like a natural palate cleanser.

Greg Wallace, Waitrose Weekend

Celery is a bit like gym membership. We buy it – often in January – as we bask in the righteous glow of our own good intentions. We use it once (in celery's case, we try to make the leftover Christmas cheese board look virtuous with a few green sticks in a jug of water), then we forget about it for another year.

The key difference is that whereas gym membership really is a waste of time and money, celery is actually a very useful, even inspiring, vegetable. It has a peppery crunch and aromatic savouriness that really is too good to ignore, particularly at this time of year when crunch is a rare commodity indeed. Celery's special qualities come to the fore when it is teamed up with the right companions – and these can often come as quite a surprise.

Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, Guardian