About – Primitive forms of the carrot date back to prehistoric times. It is believed that carrots originated in Afghanistan with cultivation in the Mediterranean area before the Christian Era. By the 13th century, cultivation of carrots had spread throughout Europe. Early explorers brought the carrot to the New World where its cultivation continued with the Colonists and even spread to several Indian cultures.

There are numerous varieties of carrots ranging in color from purple to white, and in shape from long and slender to short and thick. Today, most of the carrots consumed in the United States are of the slender, orange variety. California is the leading producer of carrots, supplying approximately 80% of all fresh carrots consumed in this country.

While carrots have always been a popular vegetable, the introduction of the peeled mini-carrot or “baby carrot” in the late 1980s revolutionized the carrot industry. Although the traditional carrot in a cello bag is still popular, mini-carrots dominate the marketplace. Their convenience and availability have made them a household staple. This surge in popularity has led to other entrants into the carrot arena like the recent introduction of purple or maroon carrots.

Selection – While unpackaged carrots, with and without their green tops, are still sold in many supermarkets, the vast majority of carrots are sold in packages. The traditional unpeeled carrot is available in 1, 2, 3, and 5 pound cello bags. When purchasing them avoid bags containing broken carrots or carrots that seem soft and pliable. Carrots should be firm and appear fresh and brightly colored in the bag.

The mini-carrot can be found in packages as small as a few ounces which are ideal for lunchboxes or snacks all the way up to 5 pound bags. More commonly, they are purchased in 1 or 2 pound bags. The processing of carrots doesn’t stop with the mini-carrot. For example, we are also able to buy carrot sticks, shredded carrots and carrot coins. All of these processed carrots have one thing in common….they all have a “Use By” or “Best By” date on them. Normally, if they have been properly refrigerated that is all we need to assure us of good eating quality. However, while these packages usually contain some moisture, avoid any package that appears “milky” inside as this indicates a problem.

Storage – Carrots should always be stored under refrigeration especially those that have been processed like mini-carrots. Storage between 33-38 degrees is preferred. Unprocessed carrots can normally be stored for several weeks. Carrots can also be frozen for use in cooking.

Preparation and Uses – Carrots are one of the most versatile of all vegetables. Once washed (and peeled if necessary), carrots can be used raw for snacking and salads or they can be baked, boiled or microwaved. They can be cut into almost any shape and size imaginable. While carrots are often used as a vegetable side dish or in main dishes such as soups, stews and stir fry, their sweetness also allows them to be used in desserts such as carrot cake. Carrot juice is also becoming a very popular item.

Nutrition – Carrots are most noted for containing beta-carotene. In fact, one medium carrot contains 270% of the RDA for vitamin A. Purple carrots contain even more, up to 25% more, and they contain the powerful antioxidant, Anthocyanin. In addition, carrots are high in dietary fiber, vitamin C, potassium, niacin, vitamin B6, phosphorus and Manganese. They have no fat or cholesterol and contain just 8 carbohydrates and 35 calories per serving.

As for the claim that carrots improve your eyesight... it’s an urban myth. However, lack of Vitamin A can cause poor vision so it is important to include foods such as carrots in your diet.

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