About – These three root vegetables are usually found in the same area of the Produce department and are often used interchangeably in various recipes. Each one, however, has its own unique characteristics.

Parsnips: This root vegetable is closely related to carrots; in fact, they look similar to carrots but are tan in color with a white flesh. They have a nutty, sweet flavor and a fragrance similar to celery. Introduced from Europe to America as early as the 1600s, they were often used as a sweetener until the development of the sugar beet in the 1800s. Parsnips are grown in temperate climates as frost is necessary to bring out their flavor.

Turnips: These bulbous root vegetables are white on the bottom and reddish purple in the top where they have protruded from the ground and been exposed to sunlight. The green tops of turnips can also be eaten and are a familiar side dish in Southeastern U.S. kitchens. Interestingly enough, “turnip jack-o-lanterns” are a Halloween tradition in Ireland and Scotland.

Rutabagas: Very similar to turnips in appearance, they are a cross between a turnip and cabbage. The flesh of rutabagas is yellowish in color and they can grow to upwards of 6 inches in diameter. With origins thought to be in Scandinavia or Russia, these very large bulbous root vegetables are also known as “swedes” or Swedish turnips. Introduced to North America in the early 18th century, they are a popular food among people with Scandinavian heritage.

Selection - While these vegetables are available year-around, the prime season for them is fall and winter. Select parsnips that are between 5 and 10 inches in length, uniform in color and firm with no soft spots. Usually, the lighter the color the more tender they will be. Look for turnips that are less than 2 inches in diameter for maximum flavor and tenderness. The skin should be smooth and free of blemishes. Rutabagas selection should be based on need as the size has little to do with taste or texture. When selecting rutabagas, make sure there are no sunken areas or soft spots.

Storage - These three root vegetables store very well in the vegetable crisper of your refrigerator. Place them unwashed in a perforated plastic bag or wrap them in paper towels. Stored in this manner, they should last for two weeks and perhaps longer.

Preparation and Uses – Parsnips should be scrubbed not peeled prior to use. They can be boiled, microwaved or roasted. Fresh parsnips will have a creamy, soft texture when cooked, but if they are too old, they will be bitter and fibrous. Parsnips are most often used in soups, stews or casseroles.

Scrub turnips and snip off the root end and leaf end prior to use. Small “baby turnips” that are less than 2 inches in diameter do not require peeling, however, larger turnips should be peeled prior to cooking. Turnips can be eaten raw and thinly-sliced turnips can be served on vegetable trays with dip. Turnips can be boiled, roasted or microwaved and make an excellent side dish. When boiled, turnips trend to have a bitter taste. To counteract this, boil a potato along with the turnips.

The first step in preparing rutabagas is to wash and peel them just like a potato. Depending on the recipe, they can be diced, sliced or left whole for cooking. They are then baked, boiled or microwaved. Typically rutabagas are used in stews and casseroles, but other favorite uses are mashing them with carrots or using them in pasties, a traditional Scandinavian dish.

Nutrition – Parsnips contain several essential minerals including vitamin B6, vitamin C and vitamin E, and are also a good source of dietary fiber. They are an excellent source of potassium and are low in calories.

Turnips are an excellent source of vitamin C and a good source of vitamin B6. They are low in carbohydrates and contain only 34 calories per serving.

Rutabagas are a very good source of vitamin C and potassium as well as being a good source of dietary fiber, vitamin B6, calcium, thiamin and magnesium. A one-cup serving contains just 50 calories.