



BULB FENNEL (*Foeniculum vulgare*)

Also known as Florence fennel, or in Italian *finocchio*, the above-ground “bulb” of bulb fennel is actually overlapped leaf stalk bases. The plant grows to about 2 feet tall and bears edible, dill-like foliage. The texture of the bulb is crisp, like celery, and the flavor is similar to fresh anise or licorice.

SITE SELECTION:

Bulb fennel prefers fertile, well-drained soils with a pH of 6.5–7.5. High levels of organic matter assist in ensuring even soil moisture. Soil should be worked deeply prior to planting to accommodate fennel’s long taproot. Grow plants in full sun. Regular, adequate irrigation produces higher yields and flavorful crops. Providing mulch can reduce weed pressure and moderate soil moisture.

TIMING:

Hot weather and long days can encourage fennel to bolt before it is fully mature. For this reason, it is best to plant after the summer solstice, when days begin to shorten and the weather is cooler. For a fall harvest, sow mid- to late summer.

Midspring plantings for a summer harvest can also be successful, but are more likely to bolt. Soil temperatures at time of sowing should be at least 50°F/10°C but preferably warmer.

In mild areas, such as coastal California, bulb fennel can be transplanted in January for an April harvest.

DIRECT SEEDING – RAW SEED:

Using the timing guideline for your desired harvest season, sow 10 seeds per foot, ¼ inch deep, in rows 18 inches apart. As soon as possible after germination, thin to 6 inches apart if full-size bulbs are desired, or thin to 4 inches apart for baby-size bulbs.

DIRECT SEEDING – PELLETED SEED:

Johnny’s offers fennel as an unsized, mini pellet to increase stand uniformity and planting efficiency, and reduce the need for thinning. If using pelleted seed, time your plantings the same as if you were using raw seed. Sow 1 pellet every 4 or 6 inches — depending on whether you want baby or full-size fennel — ¼ inch deep, in rows 18 inches apart. Thinning is not necessary.

Pellets require more water to germinate than raw seeds. Be sure to keep the soil moist consistently throughout the germination period. The initial waterings can sometimes supply only enough water to split or dissolve the pellet. If the soil dries out before the germination period is over, the seed may receive insufficient moisture and result in poor germination.

TRANSPLANTING:

Fennel is often transplanted in northern areas with short growing seasons. Using the timing guideline for your desired harvest season, sow 3 seeds or pellets per cell ¼ inch deep. As soon as possible after germination, thin to 1 plant per cell. Grow for 4–6 weeks or until the plants can be removed from the cells without disturbing the roots. Fennel can be sensitive to root damage.

When plants are 3–4 inches tall, transplant outside, spacing either 4 or 6 inches apart for baby and full-size bulbs, respectfully.

BLANCHING:

Blanching is optional for fennel. For white, more fully blanched bulbs, hill soil over the base of the bulb when it is about the size of an egg. Bulbs should be ready for harvest 2–3 weeks after hilling.

DISEASES AND PESTS:

Fennel is a relatively problem-free crop with little pressure from either diseases or pests.

HARVEST:

For full-size bulbs, harvest when the base of the bulb thickens and before seed stalks form, typically at 5–6 inches in diameter. Harvest when the diameter of the bulb is about 3 inches for baby-size bulbs.

Use sharp pruners to cut just above the taproot. Trim the leaf blades and petioles 1–2 inches above the bulb to prepare for use or storage.

STORAGE:

Optimum storage conditions are at 32°F/0°C with 95% relative humidity. Bulb fennel will store for up to 1 week.

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