

Horseradish



Horseradish is a root vegetable that belongs to the mustard family and is related to cabbage, broccoli, and brussels sprouts. The root is the edible part of the plant, just like a carrot. Illinois has about 1,740 acres dedicated to horseradish.

The United States as a whole has 2,965 acres of horseradish. That means Illinois produces over half of the horseradish and is the leading producer in the U.S. Even with only 10 horseradish farms, Collinsville, IL is known as the horseradish capital of the world.



Horseradish provides a zesty/spicy flavor that enhances many types of dishes. It is most often ground to a pulp and mixed with vinegar, but can also be mixed with other condiments like ketchup, mayo or sour cream to make different sauces. Sometimes it is simply grated fresh off the root.



Production horseradish is grown from a "set", which is one of the smaller roots off the main root. When it is growing in the field, the leaves will look like a head of romaine lettuce. In its early growth, some people collect the leaves to add to a salad mix, but leaves are generally discarded in the field during harvest.

These two photos are courtesy of Dennis Heepke



Meet the Heepke Family

Heepke Farms Inc. | Edwardsville, IL



Tell us about your farm.

My two brothers and I operate our 4th generation family farm. We raise corn, soybeans, and around 20 varieties of horseradish. We farm in Madison, Jersey, Macoupin, and Greene counties. Our mother and father's families have farmed in the Madison County area for generations. We farm around 4,500 acres total and 200 acres of that is horseradish each year.

How do you harvest horseradish?

Horseradish farming is on each end of our grain farming. We plant prior to grains and harvest after grains. We begin our harvest in early November and will continue all through the winter months and into the spring. We usually end up planting and harvesting horseradish at the same time in March and April. Harvest is digging up the roots 12-16" deep into the soil and separating the roots from the soil. This is done by a large metal blade gouging into the soil (like a plow) and bringing the soil and roots onto conveyor belts made of metal bars, allowing the dirt to fall through and the roots to ride up the conveyor into the wagon.

We expect a yield of 8,000 lbs (or more) per acre. Horseradish is a cold weather crop and is unaffected by the freezing temperatures of the winter. We will harvest so long as the soil is dry (not muddy) and not frozen. Because the sorting/packing shed is the slow part of the "harvest" we will usually harvest (dig roots) only a few days a month, but the shed work is almost every day.

How do you sell your horseradish?

Our horseradish is sold as a 1,200 lb cube of horseradish roots on a pallet and plastic wrapped. Since the roots are fresh produce, we have to store the pallets of horseradish at 28°F and ship it on a refrigerated trailer. The trailer will haul 34 of the pallets of horseradish to our customers in Baltimore, MD and Springfield, OH where they will clean, grind and mix the horseradish with the other ingredients before bottling. If you have ever had horseradish it is likely the roots were grown by a farmer in Madison County, and maybe even from my farm.



All photos on this page courtesy of Dennis Heepke