



Growing greens

Tip Sheet

Nothing says summer bounty quite like the crisp crunch of fresh greens. These vegetable leaves and stems can be used fresh in salads or sandwiches or for cooking. Greens include: Swiss chard, spinach, kale, collards and mustard greens. Turnips and beets also produce roots that can be eaten, but are often grown just for using their tops as greens. All are high in vitamins and minerals and easy to grow.

Types of greens

Swiss chard belongs to the beet family, but does not develop an edible root. Leaves and stems can be harvested all summer. Leaves are glossy green and wrinkled. Stems and veins can be white, yellow or red, depending on the variety. Small leaves and stems can be eaten raw, but larger leaves should be cooked. Leaves grow in rosettes, and it is possible to pick just the outer leaves and keep the plants growing for harvest most of the season. Cut or break leaves about one inch from the ground when harvesting. The optimum soil temperature for seeding is 55 to 75°F.

Spinach is a cool season annual and will grow in partial shade. There are two types of spinach, smooth leaf and Savoy which has crinkled leaves. The smooth leaf spinach is preferred by many because it is easier to clean. Sow spinach as early as the soil can be worked in the spring. Spinach is slow to germinate and grow. It can also be grown as a late fall crop. Once it begins to bolt (when seed heads develop on the stem), the leaves will become bitter and the plants should be removed from the garden.

Kale does best as a fall crop and its flavor is improved by light frosts. Plants can be started in the spring or in mid-July for a fall crop. Thin kale plants to eight inches apart as they begin to grow. The thinned plants may be used as the first kale meal of the season. To harvest, cut or

twist off outer leaves when they are eight to 10 inches tall. Keep plants mulched. Ornamental kale varieties are used in fall flower gardens and as a garnish rather than food.

Collards are sometimes called tree cabbage. Although it is a cool season crop, collards handle hot weather well. Seeds can be started in the spring or sown as a fall crop. Start 10 to 13 weeks before the first expected frost for fall harvesting. Roots are shallow, so great care should be used in cultivating around the plants. Mulching will keep weeds down and keep the soil cool. Harvest older outside leaves when they are eight to 12 inches tall.

Mustard grows fast, just 30 to 40 days from planting to harvest. For the best flavor, harvest the leaves before they are fully grown. Mustard goes to seed when days are long and hot, so plant early in the spring or in August for a fall crop. The curly mustard varieties withstand frost well and can be harvested late in the fall. Cut leaves when they are six to eight inches tall. New leaves will provide a continuous harvest until they become strong in flavor and tough in texture from temperature extremes.

Turnip tops and beet tops. For growing tops only, grow these close together in rows or scattered in the corner of the garden. The tops can be used as greens when the leaves are three to five inches tall. If bigger roots are desired, plant in rows about 18 inches apart. When new plants are a few inches tall, thin them so that the beets are three inches apart and the turnips are four to six inches apart. The thinned plants may be eaten as greens.

Preparing the soil

A good harvest begins with careful soil preparation. Select a location for the garden that gets at least six to eight hours of sun daily. Follow your soil test recommendation or use one

pound of 5- 20-20 per 100 square feet. Apply the fertilizer and then turn over the soil (or till) to work the fertilizer into the soil. Spread another pound of fertilizer per 100 square feet after tilling. Work in compost or well-rotted manure. Three to four inches of the soil surface can be turned in to a depth of 12 inches. All of these plants will benefit from being mulched.

Try these varieties:

Swiss chard

- Rhubarb
- Fordhook Giant
- Bright Lights

Beets

- Ruby Queen
- Detroit Dark Red

Mustard

- Green Wave
- Tendergreen

Kale

- Dwarf Blue Curled
- Vates

Turnips

- Tokyo Cross
- Seven Top

Spinach

- America
- Viking

Collards

- Vates

Harvesting

The nutritional content, freshness and flavor of the greens depend on the stage of maturity and the time of day that they are picked. Overly mature greens will be stringy, tough, coarse and sometimes bitter. The best time of the day to harvest greens is during the cool part of the morning. Refrigerate or process as soon as possible. Wash greens in cool, running water and shake to remove excess moisture before use. It is important to remove any soil that is clinging to the leaves. New, small leaves of most greens are tender and can be added to salads. Older outer leaves are cooked.

To preserve the most nutrients in the greens, cook quickly with as little water as possible. This can be done in a microwave oven or a steamer. Greens can be sautéed, too. Cook greens about one to three minutes, until they wilt.

If greens require a long cooking time to be edible, they were picked when overly mature.

Notes: