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Leafy vegetable crops for the home garden

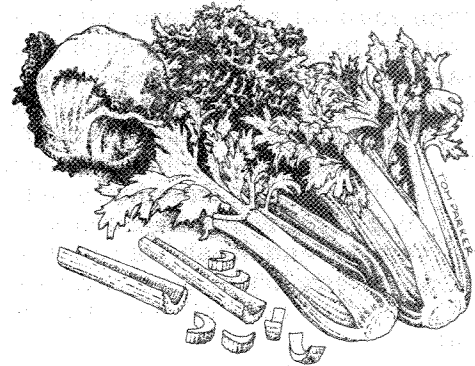
James E. Ells¹

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Quick Facts

- Leafy vegetables contain more vitamins and minerals and less calories than any other vegetables.
- They are ideal for summer lunches when heat has dulled the appetite and the desire to cook.
- Leafy vegetables do well under cool conditions and can be eaten at any stage of maturity, which makes them ideal for regions having a short growing season.
- With proper selection, culture and storage, leafy vegetables can be made available year round.



Leafy vegetables are easily grown, rich in vitamins and minerals, contain relatively few calories, and are enjoyed most when harvested fresh from the garden. They are ideal for cool temperatures and short seasons of high altitudes because they can be consumed at any stage of maturity.

When properly selected, planted, cultured and stored, a supply of leafy vegetables can be made available year round. This can be achieved with an April planting of spinach, lettuce and cabbage, a May planting of Swiss chard and August planting of lettuce and spinach. Cabbage may be harvested in October and stored in a pit for winter use (Service in Action 7.601, *Storage of home-grown vegetables*). In November, spinach may be mulched and the mulch removed in March. The leaves can be harvested after growth resumes.

Black plastic mulch is helpful in warming the soil in the spring as well as conserving moisture and controlling weeds. A winter mulch of straw and soil over spinach and parsley will help bring them through the winter for production of early spring greens.

Soil Fertility and Plant Growing

Leafy vegetables, in general, do not have extensive root systems; therefore, gardeners must concern themselves with the conditions in the top 6 inches of soil. The soil should be well supplied with organic matter, nutrients and water. Leafy vegetables, like a lawn, require high nitrogen levels. A general recommendation is to apply 2 pounds of nitrogen and 1 pound of phosphate before planting and another pound of nitrogen on July 1, per 1,000 square feet.

Seed size among leaf crops varies widely. A good rule is to plant seed to a depth of eight times its thickness and keep the soil in the seed zone moist until the seedlings emerge. Two or three seeds should be planted for each plant desired. These extra seeds are not necessarily wasted, because when the seedlings begin to crowd they may be thinned and used for salad. The row spacing varies from 1 to 3 feet and the spacing in the row varies from 2 to 24 inches, depending on plant size at maturity.

Harvesting

Commercially, whole plants are harvested mechanically. However, it usually is best for the home gardener to harvest individual leaves. In this way the plant is left in the garden to regener-

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ate more leaves for successive harvests. The matter of regeneration should be considered when deciding between head and loose-leaf varieties. (Head varieties usually are harvested whole.)

Pests

Whenever one plants a garden there is the risk of weed, insect and disease pests. These may be controlled manually—the weeds with a hoe, the diseases by removing the affected leaf or plant, and the insects by picking or washing them off the plant. When manual means are not practical a general garden fungicide spray such as Dithane at one teaspoon per gallon of water or a general insecticide such as malathion at two teaspoons per gallon of water may be used. Remember, the foliage is to be consumed, so chemicals should be used cautiously and in accordance with label directions. Wait the required number of days before harvesting and wash thoroughly before eating. If questions arise in regard to pests or pesticides, consult the local Cooperative Extension agent.

Varieties

Brussels Sprouts—Suggested varieties: Long Island Improved (Catskill) or Jade Cross (hybrid). May be direct seeded or transplanted. Sprouts will form in the axils of the leaves, beginning with the lower leaves. Harvest sprouts at 1 inch in diameter to keep plants productive. Harvest will extend from August to November.

Cabbage—Suggested varieties: Early—Golden Cross or Princess; Mid-season—Cabaret or Grand Prize; Late—Viking, Rio Grande; Red-Rondy or Ruby Perfection; Chinese—Michihli; Savoyed—Savoy Chieftain. Cabbage is a versatile vegetable used in salads or coleslaw, boiled, baked, processed into sauerkraut, or pit stored. Late varieties are used for storage and sauerkraut. Early varieties are used at higher elevations.

Celery—Suggested varieties: Dwarf Golden Self-Blanching, or Utah 52-70 R Imp. Transplants should be 10 weeks old when planted during June. Earlier transplanting may encounter cold weather that could cause bolting. One of the more difficult crops for a home gardener.

Chard (Swiss Chard)—Suggested varieties: Lucullus—light green; Fordhook Giant—dark green; Rhubarb—red veined. Very desirable because of its heat tolerance. Will provide greens and salads from July to October.

Chicory—Suggested varieties: Radichetta or Gold Lace for greens or Witloof for over-wintered greens and forcing. Forcing involves harvesting mature roots and replanting them in sand to produce blanched heads in darkness.

Collards—Suggested varieties: Georgia LS or Vates. Like mustard and kale, it is a member of the cabbage family. It will stand more heat and cold than other members of this family and, therefore, is a valued long-season green. Plants will remain productive if the growing center remains untouched while harvesting only the outer leaves.

Dandelions—Cultivated dandelions have been developed to produce on par with other greens. Instead of planting dandelions, those in the lawn can be dug, which will improve the appearance of the lawn while providing greens. The lawn, of course, should be chemical-free.

Endive—Suggested varieties: Batavian (Escarole) or Green Curled. Leaves are used for garnishing, salads and greens. The blanched white hearts are a delicacy.

Garden Cress—A cool-season crop more popular in Europe than the United States. Leaves are ready to harvest six to eight weeks from time of sowing.

Kale—Suggested varieties: Dwarf Siberian—plain outer leaves with frilled edged inner leaves; Vates—all leaves with frilled edges. Kale holds up well in cold weather and is a dependable green until the ground freezes.

Lettuce—Suggested varieties: Head—Great Lakes 659; Leaf—Grand Ice or Red Sails; Butterhead—Emerald Giant; Romaine—Signal. Lettuce is sown in April and again in late July. Keep soil surface moist until seedlings emerge. Leaf lettuce is most practical for a home garden where leaves are harvested as needed.

Mustard—Suggested varieties: Fordhook, Florida or Mitsuba. Plant for early summer or fall crop. Goes to seed in hot weather.

New Zealand Spinach—Not a spinach at all, but tolerates warm weather and continues to produce all summer. Harvest by breaking off 2 inches of the growing tips and use like spinach.

Pak Choi—Suggested varieties: Marovit or Joi Choi. Recognized by the rounded green leaves with white petioles. Is a popular green in oriental cooking.

Parsley—Suggested varieties: Moss Curled or Plain. A cool season crop that does best in spring and fall. Used for garnishing and as a flavoring ingredient. It can be over-wintered for early spring production before it bolts.

Spinach—Suggested varieties: Medania or Indian Summer. Normally spinach goes to seed in warm weather; however, these new varieties continue to produce in hot weather. A mid-summer planting guarantees a continuous supply of spinach until frost.

Water Cress—Not related to garden cress. Water cress beds usually are established around limestone springs in clean, running water. Because it requires such a unique aquatic habitat, few gardeners can produce it.