

LEEK

Gardening tips provided by
Jefferson Farm & Gardens



Overview

The leek, *Allium ampeloprasum*, is a cool season vegetable of the onion family and is related to garlic, shallots, and onions. The leek is important in the history of Wales and is even one of its national symbols. Legend has it that King Cadwallader and his soldiers wore leeks under their helmets to differentiate themselves from the enemy in a battle against the Saxons. The leek is relatively high in potassium and iron.

Choosing Varieties

There are some varieties of leeks available that differ in days until maturity, height, disease resistance, and cold tolerance, as well as other traits. A few available varieties are:

- Giant Musselburgh/American Flag (heirloom)
- King Richard (medium green leaves)
- Lancelot (virus tolerant, long white stem)

It is recommended to try a few varieties to determine overall plant performance and personal preference.

Planting Tips

The leek is a cool season vegetable that can survive a light frost.

For best results, leek seedlings should be planted in the garden. In Missouri, leek seedlings can be planted in early April. Dig a trench and place seedlings about 6 inches apart in rows that are about 1 foot apart. Plants should be planted a little deeper than they were growing, but the point where the leaves attach to the stem should not be buried to prevent rotting.

As the plants continue to grow, soil should be hilled around the base of the plant to bleach the stems. Instead, brown paper can be wrapped around the stems to bleach them if a small number of plants are grown. Bleaching creates a longer edible stem that has a sweeter flavor.

Soil Fertility and Pest Control

Leek seedlings should be planted in well-drained soils and would benefit from the addition of nutrients either in the form of a complete fertilizer or aged compost. Leeks

should receive enough water to prevent wilting without waterlogging the soil.

Onion thrips have been known to attack foliage and leave light-colored blotches on leaves. Insecticidal soaps can be used to control thrips (be sure to follow product labels).

Leek rust, which occurs as small orange pustules on leaves, can be a problem especially during wet seasons. To prevent leek rust, try to improve soil drainage by planting in a raised bed. Infected plants should be destroyed and then avoid growing leeks on that site for a few years. To prevent root rot, be sure to rotate members of the onion family with other crops each year.

Harvesting

The leek plants can be harvested when they reach about 1 inch in diameter. They do not keep well in storage, so they should be harvested when needed. If left in the ground, they will continue to increase in diameter. To harvest, the soil should be loosened around the plant with a garden fork without puncturing the stem; then the plant can be wiggled out of the soil. The roots should be trimmed as well as all but 2 inches of the leaves.

Seed Sources

Leek plants are available in the spring at local garden centers. Leek plants can be ordered from mail order companies via phone or website. Rich Farm Garden Supply (1-765-584-2500, richfarmgarden.com), Vintage Hill (1-660-848-2373, vintagehill.com), and Harris Seeds (1-800-544-7938, harrisseed.com) are some companies that sell leek varieties.

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