

SPINACH

Gardening tips provided by
Jefferson Farm & Gardens

Overview

Spinach, *Spinacia oleracea*, is a cool season vegetable of the goosefoot family and is closely related to Swiss chard and beets. The cartoon character “Popeye the Sailor” is credited with making spinach popular in the United States and increasing household consumption by 33%, thereby helping the spinach industry in the 1930’s. Spinach is high in iron and rich in vitamins A and C.

Choosing Varieties

There are many varieties of spinach available that differ in texture of leaves (savoyed or smooth) and heat tolerance, as well as other traits. A few recommended varieties for Missouri and other Midwest states are:

- Avon (good heat tolerance, savoyed leaf)
- Bloomsdale Long Standing (slow to flower)
- Giant Noble (spread 25 inches, smooth leaf)
- Melody (resistant to powdery mildew)

To enjoy spinach during the hot summer days, New Zealand spinach can be planted. It is unrelated to the common garden spinach, but can tolerate heat and has a similar flavor and texture to spinach. It should be planted after the threat of a frost, when it is safe to plant tomatoes and peppers.

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

Planting Tips

Spinach is a cool season vegetable that can withstand a freeze. It can be spring or fall planted.

In Missouri, seeds can be sown in late March to mid-April for a spring crop or in late summer, typically mid-August, for a fall crop. Seeds may become dormant if soil temperatures are above 85° F. Seeds should be planted about ½ inch deep in rows that are about 1 foot apart. Planting in a raised bed or row can help maintain higher-quality greens by improving drainage.

Once the plants are about 1 inch tall, they should be thinned for a final spacing of 2-4 inches. Sowing instructions for a particular variety can usually be found on the seed packet. To extend the harvesting season of spinach,



plant repeatedly at 10-day intervals.

Soil Fertility and Pest Control

Spinach seeds 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.

To prevent weeds, retain moisture, and to keep soil temperatures down, mulch can be applied around the plants. Spinach plants should be given enough water to prevent wilting without waterlogging the soil.

Leaf miners can damage spinach by eating winding paths inside the leaf. Minor infestations of leaf miners can be controlled by removing and disposing of infected leaves. To prevent infestations, the rows should be covered with cheesecloth or commercial row covers. Aphids can also cause damage to spinach and can be controlled with insecticidal soaps (be sure to follow product labels).

Downy mildew can be a problem when plants are growing during wet and/or humid weather. Purchase disease resistant spinach varieties and plant spinach in raised beds to allow air flow and water drainage to prevent infections.

Harvesting

Spinach can be harvested as soon as the leaves are large enough to use. Individual leaves can be cut, or the entire plant can be cut about 1 inch above the soil line to encourage the plant to regrow leaves.

Seed Sources

Seeds can be ordered from mail order companies via phone or website. Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds (1-417-924-8917, rareseeds.com) and Burpee Seeds (1-800-888-1447, burpee.com) are two companies that sell spinach varieties.

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