

SWISS CHARD

Gardening tips provided by
Jefferson Farm & Gardens

Overview

Swiss chard, *Beta vulgaris* var. *cicla*, is a cool season vegetable of the goosefoot family and is closely related to beets and spinach. In fact, Swiss chard is actually a beet that has been bred for its leafy greens instead of a bulbous root. The stems and midribs come in a variety of different colors including pink, yellow, and orange. Swiss chard is rich in vitamin A.

Choosing Varieties

There are many varieties of Swiss chard available that differ in days till maturity, color, and leaf shape, as well as other traits. A few recommended varieties for Missouri and other Midwest states are:

- Bright Lights (stems of many colors, mild taste)
- Canary Yellow (yellow stems, wrinkled leaves)
- Fordhook Giant (white stems, wrinkled leaves)
- Magenta Sunset (pink stems, smooth leaves)

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

Planting Tips

Swiss chard is a cool season vegetable that can withstand a light frost.

In Missouri, seeds can be sown in mid-to-late April. They should be planted $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ inch deep in rows that are about 18 inches apart.

Like beets, Swiss chard will need to be thinned because the seeds are actually dried berries that contain at least two seeds. Individual seeds can be purchased where the fruit has been rubbed or decorticated. The plants should be thinned for a final spacing of 4-6 inches. Sowing instructions for a particular variety can usually be found on the seed packet.

Soil Fertility and Pest Control

Swiss chard 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 keep soil temperatures down, mulch can be applied around the plants. Swiss chard plants should be given enough water to prevent wilting without waterlogging the soil.

Swiss chard is easy to grow with relatively few problems. However, flea beetles can be pests to Swiss chard by eating holes in the young leaves, slowing growth. Flea beetles can be controlled with chemicals containing the organic compound pyrethrin (be sure to follow product labels). Aphids can also be a problem and can be controlled with insecticidal soaps.

To prevent diseases be sure to rotate members of the goosefoot family with other crops each year.

Harvesting

Swiss chard can be harvested when the leaves are at least 6 to 8 inches tall. Outer leaves can be cut, allowing the heart of the plant to continue to produce greens, or the entire plant can be cut about 1 inch above ground level, encouraging the plant to regrow. The stalks can be prepared like asparagus and leaves can be used in the place of spinach.

Seed Sources

Seeds can be ordered from mail order companies via phone or website. Johnny's Selected Seeds (1-877-564-6697, johnnyseeds.com) and Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds (1-417-924-8917, rareseeds.com) are two companies that sell Swiss chard varieties.

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