

the seedlings are three to four inches tall. Overcrowding curbs growth and encourages bolting. Spinach also grows well in window boxes and pots. Use containers that are at least eight inches deep and give plants plenty of room.

Seeds will sprout in near-freezing soil, but 55 to 68 degrees F is optimal; germination rates plummet when the soil temperature tops 70. Most resources claim spinach is difficult to transplant, but that hasn't been my experience. Spring-sown seeds rot in the sappy clay soil of my garden, so I start them in individual pots on the deck. Because the pots are outdoors, the seedlings don't need to be acclimated before I transplant them. Gardeners with summers hotter than you-know-what may need to begin fall crops indoors, then give plants some shade outdoors before setting them out in the vegetable bed.

As vegetables go, spinach matures in a New York minute. Most varieties are ready to pick as a baby-leaf in 25 days and fully mature in 40 to 45 days. To have a continuous supply, I replant every 10 days until the weather is either too hot or too cold.

Spinach is a heavy feeder, but garden soil rich with organic matter normally contains all the nutrients it needs. If you're growing it in containers or if plants aren't thriving, sidedress once or twice during the growing season with diluted fish emulsion to provide an extra

Sources

Harris Seeds, Rochester, NY.
www.harrisseed.com.

Johnny's Selected Seeds, Winslow, ME. www.johnnyseeds.com.

Sow True Seed, Asheville, NC.
www.sowtrueseed.com.

W. Atlee Burpee & Co., Warminster, PA. www.burpee.com.

shot of nitrogen. Make sure to provide constant moisture—spinach is 92 percent water—and mulch to discourage weeds, cool the soil, and retain moisture for the shallow feeder roots.

PESTS AND DISEASES

Few pests—not counting rabbits—both-er spinach, but downy mildew, a fungal disease, sometimes plagues plants, especially those spaced too closely or subject to prolonged periods of rain. The leaves of affected plants have a bluish-white or gray fuzz on their undersides or yellow spots on the topsides. You can treat the diseased plants with a fungicide, or you can just pull and discard them. Most of today's cultivars have at least some built-in disease-resistance. To discourage soil-borne diseases such as fusarium, plant spinach in a different spot each year. Aphids, which can spread viruses, can be washed off with a strong spray of water.

SPINACH SUBSTITUTES FOR WARM CLIMATES

During hot weather, spinach lovers can try these heat-tolerant substitutes: Malabar spinach (*Basella alba*) and New Zealand spinach (*Tetragonia tetragonioides*). Their flavors and textures are similar to those of spinach. Malabar is a vining tropical that requires a trellis; it loves heat, full sun, and slightly acidic, fertile soil. New Zealand spinach has a spreading habit, rambling two feet or more. It likes moderate conditions, organically rich soil, a neutral pH, and plenty of water. Both plants are perennial in frost-free regions but usually grown as annuals. —K.D.C.



Malabar spinach is a tropical vine with leaves that have a flavor reminiscent of true spinach.

RECOMMENDED VARIETIES

In 2016, I had best results with two hybrid semi-savoy, both new to me: slow-to-bolt 'Indian Summer' and downy-mildew-resistant 'Carmel'. 'Space' is a superb smooth-leaf cultivar that is also highly resistant to downy mildew. I still like the open-pollinated heirloom savoy 'Bloomsdale Long Standing', which has no disease resistance but does have great flavor. All of the above mature in 35 to 45 days, but can be harvested earlier as baby spinach.

Smaller varieties that are good choices for containers include 'Baby's Leaf', which matures in 30 to 40 days, and 'America', which matures in about 50 days. 'Red Kitten', a red-stemmed spinach, is especially pretty but bolts quickly, so it is best grown as a baby-leaf; it can be harvested in as little as 23 to 34 days.

While 'Winter Bloomsdale', 'Samish', and 'Giant Winter' can mature in about 45 days, these cold-hardy varieties are particularly good choices for fall plantings that are covered over winter to provide a very early harvest in spring.

Spinach seeds don't store well—germination rates drop significantly in a year or two—which gives you a good excuse to try new cultivars every year.

ENJOYING THE HARVEST

Plants produce edible leaves for about a month. Begin harvesting as soon as the leaves are large enough to use, either by picking individually or by cutting the whole plant. If you leave two inches of growth above the crown, the plant may resprout. Spinach, especially savoy spinach, requires several washings to remove all the grit that collects in the leaves. Store unwashed or use a salad spinner or paper towels to remove excess water from washed spinach before packing loosely in a sealed plastic bag and refrigerating. Storage life is about five days.

As for the foremost spinach question—"How do I get my kids to eat it?"—take a look at the bonanza of spinach dessert recipes online. If you can't unload Chocolate Spinach Brownies with Peanut Frosting or spinach ice cream, which is delightfully green, I'd give up. Plant sweet corn, instead.

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