

Greens: A Southern Favorite in Fall Gardens

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office



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PHOTO CREDIT: William M. Johnson



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Galveston County Master Gardener volunteers gather every Thursday to perform maintenance activities at the Discovery Garden located in Carbide Park. They also harvested a bounty of assorted greens. I captured the photo accompanying this article on that day.

Over the weekend I harvested some kale and

Swiss chard. I was anticipating the delightful taste of these two freshly harvested winter greens. I was not disappointed, and the harvest and evening meal brought back memories of growing up on a family farm. Greens were a tasty and very nutritious staple at our Sunday dinners when I was kid.

Can any Southern garden

truly be a Southern garden without greens planted in the fall garden? If you are from the South, your Mother and/or Grandmother probably cooked them up with a bit of smoked meat or bacon.

In the South, the term "greens" refers to vegetables whose leaves are eaten when cooked until





tender. During cool fall weather, mustard, turnip, collards and other greens flourish in the vegetable garden.

Greens are highly recommended for the home vegetable garden because they are easy to grow and very productive. Growing greens is a great way to keep your vegetable garden productive through winter.

Mustard and turnips are fast-growing greens, and harvesting can begin as early as five or six weeks after planting. Harvest the entire plant, or "crop" the plants by removing only the lower, larger leaves. Cropping provides harvest while allowing the plant to remain and continue to grow. It also allows you to extend the harvest. Generally, mustard and turnip can be cropped until late winter or early spring if the winter is mild.

Cropping turnips will reduce the size of the root, so you may want to reserve an area of your turnips for root production. On those plants, do not harvest any leaves. The leaves will produce food through photosynthesis. This food is transferred to the roots for storage, and the plants develop nice size turnips ready to harvest in eight or nine weeks.

Collards can be grown year-round, but the best quality is obtained during the cool season. A frost will "sweeten" collards and make the greens even tastier. Properly spaced plants are best harvested

by cropping the older, larger leaves. Collards tolerate high temperatures better than most greens. They are also very cold hardy and survive temperatures in the low 20s without damage.

Spinach must have cool weather for best production and fall plantings do especially well. A warm spell can often cause this vegetable to "bolt," particularly when grown in spring. Bolt is a term used when a leafy vegetable matures and produces a flower stalk.

Cool weather, adequate water and regular fertilization with nitrogen will encourage the spinach to remain in vegetative growth cycle. Spinach is slow growing for the first few weeks after it comes up. Be patient and keep the plants well-watered, and they will eventually grow large enough to harvest the entire plant or begin cropping.

Swiss chard is an excellent substitute for spinach. It is easier to grow, more productive and tolerates warm weather much better than spinach. The leaves of chard can easily grow 14 to 18 inches tall, so production is much greater than with spinach. Chard is available in several white-stemmed types. Red stemmed types such as Vulcan and a variety called Bright Lights — which produces stems of white, rose, red, yellow gold or orange — are ornamental and even look great in flower beds.

When cooked, chard is similar in flavor to spinach, and tender young chard leaves can be eaten raw. The leaf stems are delicious when cooked separately and have a mild, almost asparagus-like flavor. Space transplants 8-to-10 inches apart. Harvest chard by cropping.

Although kale has early roots in Greek and Roman culture, it remained a relatively minor commercial crop in the U.S. until recent years. This leafy green reached celebrity status around 2012, appearing on menus of Michelin star restaurants and becoming the choice ingredient of millennial food bloggers.

Kale is a leafy green that appears on many lists of trendy superfoods, and probably with good reason. Kale is highly nutritious, containing high levels of Vitamin K, Vitamin C, beta-carotene, calcium, and carotenoids. Gardeners may be surprised to learn that kale also has a good balance of omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids.

Kale is a close relative to collards and has a similar flavor when cooked. Kale is very cold hardy and can withstand temperatures in the teens.

Leafy greens are a favorite crop to grow by home gardeners in Galveston County. It's not often that we eat plant leaves, but leafy greens can provide a wide range of flavor.

