

# Greens: A Southern Favorite in Fall Gardens

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**PHOTO CREDIT: William M. Johnson**

**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.**

Over the past weekend, I took a stroll through the Discovery Garden located near the AgriLife Extension Office in Carbide Park. I experienced a moment of déjà vu as I approached a vegetable bed maintained by a Master Gardener. The bed contained a bountiful crop of healthy 'Florida Broad-leaf' mustard greens.

Can any Southern garden

truly be 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. My parents always had a fall vegetable garden when I was a young boy growing up on a farm in Virginia. Greens were a tasty and very nutritious staple at our Sunday dinners when I

was kid.

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.

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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 from a planting done now 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. You can prevent your spinach from bolting so it will produce leaves instead of flowers.

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, 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.

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. Space transplants 10-to-12

inches apart.

Cabbage is another leafy vegetable that is suited to cool weather. Green and red cabbage varieties are available. The heads are ready to harvest when they become hard. Transplants planted now should be ready to harvest in late winter or early spring.

Although not generally cooked, lettuce is also often included with the greens, and leaf and semi-heading varieties of lettuce are easy to grow. The heading lettuce varieties, such as Iceberg, are more of a challenge. Leaf or semi-heading types of lettuce to try include romaine, buttercrunch, bibb and oak leaf types, which are sure winners.

These days, lettuces come in an amazing variety of colors, from deep green to chartreuse and shades of pink to red to burgundy. And the leaves may be smooth, ruffled or fringed. Lettuce cultivars with red foliage add interest and extra nutrition to your salads. Red Sails is a variety that is easy to grow and does not become bitter until the heat of summer.

Other vegetables can be planted now in your garden along with greens. Root crops such as radish, carrot and beet thrive in cool weather. Shallots, onions and garlic should also be planted now. Garlic and onions will need to grow until May in order to produce bulbs. Of course, green onions and shallots can be harvested all winter and into early spring.

