

Growing Leafy Greens

Leafy greens such as lettuce, spinach, kale, collards, turnip and mustard greens, endive, escarole, radicchio and chard are among the easiest vegetables to grow. In Pennsylvania spring and fall plantings are recommended. Leafy greens can be started from seeds indoors, directly seeded into the garden, or purchased as seedlings.



Selecting and Preparing a Site

Loose, fertile, moist, sandy loam soils are recommended for growing leafy greens. Select a site that will receive at least six hours of direct sunlight per day. Test the soil prior to planting and apply fertilizer and lime based on test results, mixing them into the soil before seeding or transplanting.



Planting

For head lettuce, romaine, and radicchio, start with seeds indoors. Sow the seeds 5–7 weeks before the desired transplanting dates. (In Pennsylvania, the recommended transplanting dates are April 20th, August 15th, or both.) Once germinated, transplant the seedlings into cells or flats. Reduce water and temperatures for about 3 days and place them outdoors during the day one week prior to transplanting to help them adjust to outside conditions.

If planting seeds directly into the garden, consider that seeds are often small and must be planted at the proper depth. Lettuce, turnip greens, and mustard greens should be planted $\frac{1}{4}$ inch deep. Escarole, endive, spinach, and radicchio should be planted $\frac{1}{2}$ inch deep. Recommended seeding dates are as follows:

- Leaf lettuce: April 1st – August 1st
- Spinach: April and the end of August
- Turnip and mustard greens: April 1st – August 1st
- Endive and escarole: May to the end of July
- Kale: March/April and July
- Collards: April and July
- Swiss Chard: March/April and September/October in southeastern PA; May in western and northern PA

If planting multiple rows, sow seeds in wide, banded rows 12 to 24 inches apart. Within rows, space seeds about 6 to 15 inches apart with kale, collards, and endive needing the most spacing.



Caring for the Site

Leafy greens mature quickly (40 to 70 days) and require cool, consistently moist growing conditions. Regular watering helps cool the soil as spring days become warmer. Side-dress (lay a line of fertilizer along the plant row, about 4 inches away from the stems, and then another row the same way on the opposite side of the plants) with an all-purpose fertilizer or compost one or two times during the growing season.

Bolting is a common problem with leafy greens. Bolting is the formation of flowers and seeds and destroys the flavor of the leaves, making them bitter and tough. High temperatures, long periods of high light intensities, and drought contribute to this problem. Maintaining cool conditions and reducing the light intensity as days get longer in early summer help reduce bolting.





Harvesting

Once leaves are large enough, they can be harvested. Leaf lettuce and spinach are typically harvested when leaves are 4 to 6 inches long. Kale, collards, mustard greens, and chard can be harvested when leaves are about 10 inches long.

Remove leaves with sharp scissors or pruners. The entire plant can be harvested when the leaves are fully developed or they can be harvested a few leaves at a time as they are needed to extend the harvest period.

When harvesting individual leaves, harvest those on the outside of the plant first and leave the inner, younger leaves to continue to develop. Avoid harvesting large, overly mature leaves, especially on leafy greens like kale, collards, chard, and mustards. If outer leaves are too large, they can be tough and stringy.



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