As winter wanes, we tend to fantasize over seed catalogs, imagining how productive and beautiful the garden will be this year. It can be tempting to start seeds early. In northern regions, the wait until the soil is warm enough and “all danger of frost has passed” for heat-loving mainstays such as tomatoes, basil, peppers, and squashes can seem interminable.

So don’t wait: Turn to the catalog pages for cold-hardy greens. The descriptions will lift your spirits: “Prefers cool weather.” “Ready for tossing into salad or soup 3 or 4 weeks after seeding.” “Plant as early as the soil can be worked.”

**GET STARTED**

Early cold-hardy greens make the most of space in vegetable beds. They are harvested before warm-season crops fill out and then planted again in late summer for a fall harvest. (continued)
Greens are easy to grow from seed. They prefer being direct-sown outdoors in rich, well-drained, loamy soil and kept moist. Full sun gets them going early on, but afternoon shade is fine. Occasional watering with compost tea or fish and seaweed liquid fertilizer keeps plants well nourished, and mulch, applied as the soil warms, prevents drying out. Direct-sown crops require thinning to prevent overcrowding; all baby greens can go right into the salad bowl. Harvest cut-and-come-again greens like arugula, endive, and mesclun mixes with scissors when they are 3 to 4 inches tall.

For a really early start, seeds can be sown in flats indoors 4 to 6 weeks before transplanting outside. Use sterile potting soil mix and water with diluted liquid fertilizer after the second set of leaves forms. To help transplants “harden off,” place flats outdoors in partial shade during the day, increasing their exposure to sun over a week or two, to get them acclimated to outdoor conditions. Transplants potted in lightweight containers (use a 50/50 compost/potting soil mix) can be easily moved to a cool garage or enclosed porch when the mercury dips below freezing.

Hot weather causes many greens to go to seed, taste too strong, or turn bitter. To ensure a continuous harvest . . .

- Harvest young leaves.
- Give them some shade (especially spinach)—use natural shade or shadecloth tunnels or interplant with taller vegetables or flowers.
- Keep well watered and don’t crowd plants.

Be a Beat the Heat

In Southern Regions:
- Direct-seed in fall and keep well-watered and fertilized to get established.

In Northern Regions:
- Direct-seed in mid- to late summer, allowing for some shade in hot weather.

In Southern Regions:
- Harvest only outer leaves, leaving 70 percent of the plant to grow new ones.
- Mulch with fluffy leaves or straw to trap warm air.
- Remember: Some plants may go dormant when temperatures dip below freezing, but they resume growth in early spring.

In Northern Regions:
- Harvest only outer leaves, leaving 70 percent of the plant to grow new ones.
- Mulch with fluffy leaves or straw to trap warm air.
- Remember: Some plants may go dormant when temperatures dip below freezing, but they resume growth in early spring.

Southernners can grow many greens all winter. In northern regions, hardy varieties may be picked into December. Arugula, Swiss chard, collard, kale, minutina, tatsoi, and other Asian greens are good bets.

Beat the Heat

Harvest young leaves.

Give them some shade (especially spinach)—use natural shade or shadecloth tunnels or interplant with taller vegetables or flowers.

Keep well watered and don’t crowd plants.


Showstoppers

Use green and not-necessarily-green “greens” alone or as accents with flowers in containers or in the garden:


‘Outrageous’ red romaine and ‘Red Ursa’ kale rival the foliage of many ornamental plants.
There are many ways to enjoy greens—for example, braised radicchio, baked kale chips, arugula pesto, and salads with varied colors, textures, and flavors. Growing your own greens lets you fine-tune the mix of assertive and mild flavors to suit your taste.

**RED AND GREEN MIX-AND-MATCH SAUTÉ**

This versatile sauté makes a tasty side dish, lasagna filling, or curry or pasta topping. Extras freeze well and are handy for quick soup-making. Remember that leafy greens cook down to a much smaller volume, so start with big bunches.

- red-stemmed chard (10 to 20 stems)
- mixed greens (10 to 20 stems)
- olive oil
- 1 red bell pepper, diced
- 1 onion, sliced
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- salt and pepper, to taste
- white wine

Wash and partially dry the chard and other greens (moisture left on the leaves steams them when sautéing, reducing the need to add additional oil). Remove the stems and set aside. Stack the leaves and cut them crosswise into 1-inch ribbons, keeping different varieties separate. Cut all of the stems (continued)
where to find seeds

Greens such as bok choy, ‘Bright Lights’ Swiss chard, ‘Red Russian’ kale, spicy arugula, and mesclun mixes increasingly are appearing alongside more common vegetables in catalogs and on seed racks in garden centers. For less familiar greens, such as miner’s lettuce (a Pacific Northwest native) and ‘Wasabi’ arugula, try specialty catalogs and independent garden centers.

Variations:

- Add capers, raisins and hot pepper flakes, or mushrooms for a side dish.
- Add boiled potatoes and cooked sausage to make it a meal.
- Add caramelized onions and serve as an appetizer on thin toasted baguette rounds with some chevre and a drizzle of balsamic vinegar.
- Serve on whole grain toast; top with a poached egg, shaved Parmesan, and freshly ground black pepper for breakfast.
- Combine sautéed bok choy, mizuna, or mustard greens with tamari sauce for an Asian flavor and serve over rice for a meal.