

Get a jump on the season . . .

GROW GORGEOUS GREENS



—garden design, Andrew Dubridge

◀ An early-season garden with kale, lettuce, onion, rhubarb, and asparagus.

↓ 'Mei Quing' Chinese cabbage (below) and self-sewn 'Osaka' Japanese red mustard spinach (bottom) are almost too pretty to eat.



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 such as kale, romaine, radicchio, and mizuna can be started indoors, then hardened off outside in partial shade before transplanting.

BY KAREN BUSSOLINI

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.

BEAT THE HEAT

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

➔ **Make successive plantings** of fast-growing, early-maturing varieties such as tatsoi and mache and enjoy them before it gets hot.

- ➔ **Harvest young leaves.**
- ➔ **Give them some shade** (especially spinach)—use natural shade or shade cloth tunnels or interplant with taller vegetables or flowers.
- ➔ **Keep well watered** and don't crowd plants.
- ➔ **Select heat-resistant varieties**—Swiss chard,

‘Indigo’ radicchio, ‘Green Wave’ mustard greens, ‘Te You’ Chinese broccoli, and ‘Hi Crop’ or ‘Morris’ heading collard greens.



WORK WITH WINTER

Southerners 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.

IN SOUTHERN REGIONS:

- **Direct-seed in fall** and keep well-watered and fertilized to get established.



—Karen Bussolini

➔ A woodshed makes a good late-winter spot to grow early greens. This planter is a wooden crate lined with straw and then filled with potting soil.

- **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.
- **Pay attention to frost warnings**—cover with lightweight bedsheets at night.
- **Grow in cold frames or other season-extending structures.**
- **Watch out!** Snow cover insulates but may cause rot or crush or make greens inaccessible; look for resprouting in spring.

IN NORTHERN REGIONS:

- **Direct-seed in mid- to late summer**, allowing for some shade in hot weather.

- **Dig up small plants** in late fall, then pot them up and overwinter in a cool basement or porch.



SHOWSTOPPERS

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

- **Garnet-burgundy ‘Midnight Ruffles’** looseleaf lettuce or ‘Rougette de Montpellier’ red butterhead lettuce surrounded by purple alyssum is almost too pretty to eat.
- **‘Osaka purple’** mustard spinach, ‘Rustic’ arugula, and ‘Ruby Streaks’

mustard create serendipitous combinations by repeatedly self-sowing.

- **‘Pot of Gold’, ‘Scarlet Charlotte’,** and heirloom ‘Italian Silver Rib’ chards, with green puckered leaves on strikingly colored stems and ribs, make for bold color compositions.
- **‘Outrageous’** red romaine and ‘Red Ursa’ kale rival the foliage of many ornamental plants.

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COOKING WITH GREENS

➔ 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
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into ½-inch pieces. Heat enough olive oil to coat the bottom of a large, tall-sided skillet (on medium to low heat). Sauté the stems with the red pepper and onion, adding the garlic after a few minutes. When these are soft, stir in the toughest greens (broccoli, collards, kale, raab). As the leaves soften, add the next-toughest ones (bok choy, Swiss chard, chicory, spinach), followed by salad greens (arugula, mizuna). Baby greens go in whole at the last minute. Keep stirring and tasting, adding salt and pepper to taste and some white wine or olive oil to prevent sticking. Don't overcook.

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.



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.

➔ **High Mowing Organic Seeds**
www.highmowingseeds.com

➔ **John Scheepers Kitchen Garden Seeds**
www.kitchengardenseeds.com

➔ **Johnny's Selected Seeds**
www.johnnyseeds.com

➔ **Renee's Garden**
www.reneesgarden.com

➔ **Seeds of Change**
www.seedsofchange.com

➔ **Southern Exposure Seed Exchange**
www.southernexposure.com

