

Greens: A Southern Favorite in Fall Gardens

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office



PHOTO CREDIT: Dr. 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.

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. My parents always had a fall vegetable garden when I was a young boy growing up on our family 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. And

November is an excellent time to plant them.

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Mustard and turnips are



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fast growing greens. Mustard and turnips can be planted until the end of November. Harvesting can begin as early as five or six weeks after planting depending on temperatures. 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 are another green that commonly found in Southern gardens. Mid-September is the last date recommended for planting collards but I've seen a few transplants still for sale at a couple of local garden centers. Even though we are past the recommended planting date for collards, I would certainly plant collards now as transplants.

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.

Cool weather, adequate water and regular fertilization with nitrogen will promote optimal production. 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.

Other greens commonly found in Southern garden include Swiss chard and kale. These greens should have been planted in September.

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.

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. Of course, green onions and shallots can be harvested all winter and into early spring.

