

Campaign for School Gardening



Crop Sheet: Spinach & Chard

Description

Latin name: Spinach = *Spinacia oleracea*,

Chard = *Beta vulgaris* subsp. *cicla* var *flavescens*

Spinacia = Medieval name, Latinised from the Italian 'spinacio',
oleracea = of the vegetable garden.

Beta = Latin for beet, *vulgaris* = common, *flavescens* = becoming yellow/ yellowish.

Some varieties of chard have brightly coloured, attractive leaf-stalks, in many colours of the rainbow – red, pink, white, yellow, orange. They are an attractive addition to the flower border and are a colourful addition to any vegetable patch.



These are both leafy crops in the *Chenopodiaceae* family. This is also known as the goosefoot family as the leaves look like the feet of a goose! Chard is also closely related to beetroot and sugar beet and is also called 'leaf beet' or confusingly 'spinach beet'. Other edible relatives include amaranth and orache.

You could compare them to different leafy crops in the cabbage (*Brassica*) family.

History

Spinach originates from Iran (Persia) and spread to China around 600AD. The Moors introduced spinach to Spain in the eleventh century, but its widespread cultivation in Europe did not occur until the Middle Ages.

It is believed that the Romans may have originally cultivated chard (leaf-beet) from wild sea-beet found in the coastal areas of Europe and western Asia.

Interesting Facts About Spinach & Chard

Spinach can be eaten raw or cooked. It is quick to cook, using just a small amount of water to boil. When cooked both spinach and chard wilt down considerably. Chard can be cooked in a similar way, but the stems need longer cooking than the leaves.

Spinach can be used in lots of recipes including soups, quiches, curries, pates and soufflés. Spinach is also available in tins or in frozen form.

Swiss chard tart (*tourte aux feuilles de bette*) is served as a dessert speciality in Nice, France.

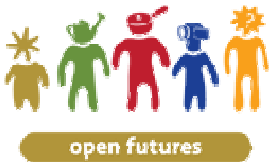
Spinach contains lots of good vitamins including beta-carotene, and vitamins A, B and C and minerals including iron and folic acid. Cook briefly to minimise losing these vitamins and minerals.

Spinach is the favourite food of the old cartoon character Popeye. By eating a can of spinach Popeye the sailor gained enough strength to defeat his rival Bluto.

(Sources: 'RHS Fruit & Vegetable Gardening' by Michael Pollock; 'Food Plants of the World' by Ben-Erik van Wyk and 'The New Oxford Book of Food Plants' by J.C. Vaughan & C.A. Geissler.

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How to Grow Spinach & Chard

Growing conditions

Both crops prefer fertile, moisture-retentive soil, and thrive when lots of organic matter (e.g. compost, well-rotted manure) has been added to the soil. Alternatively a pelleted fertiliser can be added to the soil before sowing, such as pelleted chicken manure.

To prevent the leaves tasting bitter make sure the soil is rich and contains plenty of organic matter.

Chard likes a sunny site, as do winter spinach varieties. Summer spinach prefers semi-shade, so try growing it amongst rows of taller crops.

Chard is considered easier to grow than many varieties of spinach, as it is less prone to bolting (going to seed). There are winter-hardy varieties of both chard and spinach, but they don't grow much in winter and become ready to cut in spring.

When to grow

Chard: Direct in the soil April – July

Spinach: Summer varieties mid-March – end of May, winter varieties in September (and August if you have a summer holiday gardening club). Check seed packets carefully for sowing times of different types.

One sowing of chard can provide a crop for many months, but spinach is more short lived.

How to grow

Chard: Sow thinly 1.5cm deep in rows/ drills. If planting more than one row allow 40cm between rows. Once seedlings have grown, thin out to allow 20cm between plants (you can use the thinnings in salads & cooking).

Spinach: Sow thinly 1.5cm deep in rows/ drills. If planting more than one row allow 30cm between rows. Once seedlings have grown thin out to allow 8cm between plants (you can use the thinnings in salads & cooking). A few weeks later harvest every alternate plant to allow 15cm final spacing between plants.

Water during prolonged dry periods; mulching (putting a layer of compost/ straw/ leaf mould etc) will help keep moisture in the soil. Unless your school is in a mild part of the country, you will need to protect both spinach and chard during the winter. Cover with cloches or protect the crown with straw and fleece.

Harvesting

Chard: Pull off the outer leaves when they are large enough for the kitchen; don't wait until they reach maximum size. Small leaves can be used in salad.

Spinach: Harvest the leaves continually once large enough to pick.

Summer varieties: Pick from late May to the end of October.

Winter varieties: Pick from October through to April.

Pest and Disease Problems

Chard: Fungal leaf spot can disfigure older leaves, younger leaves unaffected.

Spinach: Downy mildew – this can be reduced by ensuring spacing between plants or buying mildew resistant varieties. Birds can eat seedlings so cover with netting or fleece.

(Refer to RHS website gardening advice for examples of pests and diseases).

Varieties to try: Chard: 'Bright Lights', 'Bright Yellow', 'Rhubarb Chard' Spinach: 'Palco' F1 AGM (Mildew Resistant), 'Tetona' F1 AGM (Mildew Resistant) 'Scenic' F1 AGM (Mildew Resistant).

Find other good spinach and chard cultivars (varieties) here: www.rhs.org.uk/plants/documents/AGMveg2005.pdf



(Sources: RHS Fruit & Vegetable Gardening by Michael Pollock & RHS Website 'Grow Your Own Veg' www.rhs.org.uk/vegetables/crops/index.asp)