



# Campaign for School Gardening



## Crop Sheet: Leeks

### Description

Latin name: *Allium porrum*

*Allium* = Latin name for garlic, *porrum* = with leek-like leaves.

Long, thin vegetable with wide, flat leaves. The bases of the leaves encircle each other to form an elongated, cylindrical white bulb, also known as a 'pseudostem'. The white base of the stem is called the 'shank'.

The leek is a member of the onion family. Relatives include onions, shallots, chives, garlic and spring onions. In crop rotation leeks are often included with roots.

Leeks are hardy vegetables, which mean they do not die down when the weather gets frosty and colder. They can be harvested from the autumn, all the way through winter and into the following spring.



### History

It is thought that the leeks we grow in our gardens probably evolved from the wild leek (*Allium ampeloprasum*), which is found growing around the Mediterranean and Central and Northern Europe, including the United Kingdom.

Preserved remains of leeks have been found in Egyptian tombs, dating this crop to 2000BC.

The Greeks grew leeks and called them prasa. In Homer's 'Odyssey', Odysseus returns to Ithaca to find his father digging and said to him "There is never a plant, neither a fig tree nor yet grapevine nor olive nor pear tree nor leek bed uncared for in your garden".

The Romans introduced the cultivated leek to Britain, where they became an important food plant. Emperor Nero was very fond of leeks as he thought that eating them would improve his singing voice. He was given the nickname 'porrophagus', meaning 'leek-eater'; although no one called him this to his face!

The leek is the national emblem of Wales, to commemorate the victory of King Cadwallader over the Saxons in AD640. It is believed that the Welsh soldiers wore leeks in their helmets to distinguish them from their Saxon enemies.

### Interesting Facts about Leeks



The leek is a key ingredient in many famous soups, including 'vichyssoise' (a leek and potato soup invented in the USA by a French chef) and the Scottish 'cock-a-leekie' soup.

Houseleeks (*Sempervivum*) are not related to the vegetable leek, but are succulent plants. In some parts of the UK, it is folklore to grow houseleeks on the house roof to ward off lightning and witches!

(Sources: 'RHS Fruit & Vegetable Gardening' by Michael Pollock; 'Whole Foods Companion' by Dianne Onstad; 'Food Plants of the World' by Ben-Erik van Wyk, 'The New Oxford Book of Food Plants' by J.C. Vaughan & C.A. Geissler and 'Cabbages & Kings: the origins of fruit & vegetables' by Jonathon Roberts).

(Photographs: Taken by & copyright RHS/ Open Future growit project, RHS/Fiona Seckett & RHS website. Thanks to Barnham & Tangmere Primary Schools).



# Campaign for School Gardening



## How to

### Grow Leeks

#### Growing conditions

Leeks grow best in a deep, rich soil. To get a bumper crop you will need to improve the growing area by digging in plenty of compost or well-rotted manure in the previous autumn.

#### When to grow

March and April: either direct outside or can be started off in pots or module trays.

Young plants are raised in a seed bed (or pots) and then transplanted. Transplant means to dig up all the small plants and then space them out and replant in their final growing spaces.

This means that leeks can be transplanted into soil previously used for other crops, so they don't take up a large area of your veg plot in early summer.

#### How to grow

Sow seed thinly 13mm deep, in rows 15cm apart in March and April. Soil needs to be finely raked and take care not to make the rows too deep for the small seed.

Alternatively fill a pot or module tray with compost, tap down so it is level 15mm from the top of the pot, then finely sprinkle the seeds and cover with 13mm compost. Pots can be placed outside or in a cold frame and need to be regularly watered.

The leeks are ready to transplant from June until July when they are about 20cm high and the thickness of a pencil. Water well before lifting and transplanting. Use a fork to lift the whole row and shake off surplus soil on the roots. Separate out into individual plants and trim the roots to 2cm long, they will then fit easily into the planting holes.



Using a dibber make 15cm deep holes, spaced 15cm apart.

If transplanting more than 1 row then space the rows 30cm apart.

Drop a leek plant into each hole. Fill the hole with water to settle the roots.

Top up with water as necessary for the plants to establish. You do not need to backfill the holes with soil, they will gradually fill with soil from watering.

By dropping the plants into the holes you will get longer white stems, this process is known as blanching. To increase the length of white stem further it can be blanched by gently drawing dry soil around the stem in stages, but try not to allow soil to fall between the leaves. Another easier way to blanch the stems is to slide a section of drainpipe, tubing or similar over the plants. The stems are blanched as they are not exposed to the light.

#### Harvesting

Start lifting when the leeks are still quite small to ensure a long harvest period (from the autumn term all the way through the winter and into the next spring). Gently lift from the soil using a fork.

Leeks can remain in the ground through out the winter until they are needed.

#### Pest and Disease Problems

Leeks are usually trouble free. In some areas onion flies and leek moth attack the plants. Growing leeks under insect-proof mesh is the best way of avoiding these insects. Rust is a very common fungal disease in late summer spoiling the leek's appearance – choose cultivars (varieties) with partial resistance if this is a problem in your area. (Refer to RHS website gardening advice for examples of pests and diseases).

**Varieties to try:** 'Autumn Giant2 – Porvite' (rust resistant), 'Oarsman' (rust resistant) 'Toledo' (all AGM)

Find other good leeks here: [www.rhs.org.uk/plants/documents/AGMveg2005.pdf](http://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](http://www.rhs.org.uk/vegetables/crops/index.asp))

