

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener  
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Chefs value leeks and shallots for the mild, subtle flavors they add to sauces and soups. Both vegetables are closely related to onions, but if you've purchased them at a supermarket, you've probably noticed that they're more expensive than the standard yellow bulb onion. If you like to cook with gourmet ingredients, you can plant leeks and shallots in your vegetable garden this spring and harvest your own specialty crops.

To provide the correct soil fertility for leeks and shallots, have your garden soil tested and follow the fertilizer recommendations given in the test results. If you don't conduct a soil test, apply a complete fertilizer that's formulated for vegetable gardens, following the instructions on the packaging. Leeks in particular grow well in soil that is rich in organic matter.

### **Leeks**

Leeks do not produce bulbs, but their leaves enlarge at the base to form a pseudostem, the succulent white to light green part of the plant. They grow well in cool to moderate weather, but some varieties withstand winter temperatures better than others. Generally, varieties that form short pseudostems are more cold hardy.

Start leeks from seed indoors in flats or pots, or purchase transplants at nurseries or garden centers. Although it's possible to plant seed directly outdoors, this method is less likely to be successful. If weeds sprout in the garden bed, shallow-rooted leeks lose out in the competition for nutrients, water and space. Direct-seeded leeks also take longer to reach mature size than transplants do.

Begin indoor sowing as early as ten to twelve weeks before you plan to transplant outdoors. Leek seeds may be started from about mid-December until late April. When choosing a sowing date, consider the hardiness of the variety you're growing, and the season you want to harvest the crop. December to January sowings will be ready for harvest in July or August. April sowings will not be ready for harvest until the winter or following spring, so choose cold-hardy varieties for late sowing dates. You can prolong the harvest season by making several sowings at two to three week intervals. Consider growing more than one variety, matching varietal hardiness to the seasonal conditions the plants will encounter. Read seed catalogs and packet information to select appropriate varieties.

Before planting outdoors, harden off seedlings for one to two weeks. Put the flats outdoors in a sheltered spot for an hour or two the first day, then gradually increase the amount of time the plants stay outside each following day.

Plant leeks outdoors in rows 18 to 24 inches apart, spacing them four to six inches apart in the row. Some gardeners plant leeks in holes or trenches dug three or four inches deep, which makes it easier to blanch the pseudostems. Blanch leeks by gradually mounding the surrounding soil around the base of the plant. This process results in larger, whiter, more tender pseudostems.

Leeks reach harvest size about 80 to 120 days after transplanting, but the harvest period is flexible. You can begin to dig them when stems are about one-half inch in diameter.

### **Shallots**

Shallots form a bulb or cluster of bulbs just below the soil surface. Traditionally, shallots have been grown by planting bulb divisions, but since the early 1990s, true seed of shallot has also been available to gardeners. Seed-sown shallots form a single bulb during their first growing season.

Shallot bulb divisions may be planted in either fall or spring. In spring, plant during March, or as soon as your garden soil is workable. It's helpful to keep in mind how shallots respond to temperature and the length of the daylight period. During early spring when days are short and cool, shallots develop roots and leaves. It is only when days become longer and the temperature rises that the bulbs start to

develop. An early planting will ensure that the roots and leaves have time to become well established, in order to supply energy for the optimum growth of the bulbs.

The French red shallot is the most common type, but yellow, white and gray varieties are also available. Since shallots are sensitive to day length, select long-day shallots varieties, which are adapted to the longer summer days in our northern latitude.

Plant shallot bulbs about one inch deep and three to four inches apart, in rows about 18 to 24 inches apart. Lift bulbs when the leaves die down in summer, then allow them to cure in a dry, shaded spot for two to four weeks. Store the bulbs in mesh bags or slatted crates, in a cool, dry, well-ventilated area.

Both leeks and shallots have relatively shallow root systems, so it's important to keep the soil uniformly moist during the growing season. Vegetable gardens require about one inch of water per week, from precipitation, irrigation, or a combination of the two. For shallots, allow the soil to dry out shortly before the bulbs reach harvest size in summer. This helps to avoid disease, and assists the curing process.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.