

In League with Leeks

How many times a week are you using leeks in the kitchen? Although many of us associate leeks with soup, especially vichyssoise, leeks are useful and delicious in salads and stir fry; steamed, grilled, simmered in wine; as a scallion substitute; as well as in soups, stews, gratins, tarts, and savory galettes. Annie Somerville's *Fields of Greens* cookbook lists no less than sixteen recipes which use leeks, and they're not all soup recipes: lasagne, pizza, risotto ... a mouth-watering selection. If you aren't able to step outside right now to harvest a few leeks, you're missing a garden gem.

If you had sown leek seed just one year ago, you could probably dig some leeks right now and start cooking. *Dig* is the operative word here, as the long-season cold-tolerant leek really puts down its roots, and you risk breaking it off if you try to *pull* a mature specimen from the soil. That is one of the few disadvantages you'll note as you evaluate this vegetable. Delicious, nutritious, and easily grown, leeks don't have a peak time at which they must be harvested. Whereas onions need to be harvested, dried and properly stored, leeks wait patiently in the garden without significant deterioration of quality. By now you may have noted another minor disadvantage: leeks take a *long* time to mature. However, gardeners may *begin harvesting* many varieties in four to six weeks, as scallion substitutes or "baby leeks".

The leek, *Allium ampeloprasum*, *porrum* group, is a member of the *Liliaceae* family. A mild-flavored, onion relative which does not form much of a bulb, the leek has a six- to ten-inch-long cylindrical stem, up to two inches in diameter at maturity, that is eaten raw or cooked. The entire plant might be several feet tall, with flat, strap-like, rather tough leaves that usually contribute to the compost rather than the soup-pot.

The so-called "autumn" leeks (less hardy varieties with shorter "days to maturity") can be sown very early in spring indoors in northern and wet climates, and transplanted to the garden when the weather and soil permit. They should be mature by autumn. Their leaves tend to be light green.

King Richard is a popular autumn leek which might have, at maturity, foot-tall white stalks in excess of two inches in diameter. It is a fast grower (about four months from seeding to maturity) compared to many leeks.

"*Winter*" leeks, which are hardy enough to stand in the garden during the winter months, can be started early like the autumn leeks, but may also be sown outdoors through early summer. They can be harvested from the time they reach pencil size until late winter or early spring. The leaves of winter leeks tend to be dark blue-green.

Definitions

vichyssoise

a soup made with potatoes, leeks, and cream and typically served chilled

cultivar

a plant variety that has been produced in cultivation by

selective breeding

Definitions are from the New Oxford American Dictionary, 2001

Saint Victor, a hardy, productive, traditional French cultivar, has deep blue-green foliage with a purplish tinge which turns more violet in cold weather. It has excellent flavor and quality.

Alaska, *Giant Musselburgh*, *Broad London*, and *Carina* are also recommended winter varieties.

Decide when you want to be able to harvest leeks from the garden. Select an appropriate variety or varieties. To help you decide when to sow the seed, see Oregon State University's [commercial vegetable production guide for leeks](#) for a chart showing approximate seeding, transplanting and expected harvest dates for early, summer, fall (early and late) and winter (early and late) leeks. For simplicity's sake, you may wish to sow as early as possible (ten to twelve weeks before the average date of the last spring frost), because of the four- to five-month growing season required by most varieties.

Although Pacific Northwesterners who garden in clay soil discover that leeks prosper in such an environment, the ideal soil for leeks is a fertile, loose, fine, sandy loam well amended with organic matter and having a slightly acidic pH (6.0 - 6.5). Add a complete fertilizer when preparing the soil. Organic gardeners might mix into the bottom of the planting trench, a pound of well-rotted chicken manure or a half-pound of fish meal, per foot of trench; or work three to four bushels of completely rotted manure or leaf humus into each one hundred square feet of planting area or each one hundred feet of row.

Leeks are seldom bothered by pests. Nevertheless, it is wise to practice good crop rotation, avoiding planting leeks in any portion of the garden where a member of the onion family has grown in the past three years.

Since leek seedlings may spend nearly two months in the container in which they germinate, start them in something deep enough to provide them room to grow healthy roots: a container that is at least three inches deep. Sow the seeds about a half inch deep and a half inch apart. If you are starting a flat, make rows two inches apart. The seeds should germinate in under two weeks. Although leeks can germinate at temperatures as low as 40 or 50 degrees F, optimum germination temperature is 70 degrees F. Leeks started early in the year in natural light benefit from at least two to three hours of supplementary light each day. Seedlings should be grown at 65 - 70 degrees F during the day and 55 - 60 degrees F at night. Feed the seedlings a dilution of fish emulsion or something similar every week or two.

Once the seedlings are three inches tall, thin them to a one-inch spacing. Many gardeners keep the tops trimmed to three inches, so that the plants will be stockier and sturdier at transplant time. Use sharp, clean scissors for this once-a-week "haircut". If the seedlings are thriving, thin them again, to a distance of two inches apart, when they are four or five weeks old (or five inches tall, if you are not trimming the tops).

At seven weeks, the seedlings should be about the diameter of a knitting needle. Harden them off during their eighth week, before transplanting them to the garden. Take the young leeks outside for an increasing length of time each day to gradually expose them to the world in which they will mature. Start in a shady sheltered location, and by the end of the week put them in the sun. Take them inside each evening.

Because the white stalk of the leek is the best part for eating, most gardeners take pains to "blanch" the leek by one of several methods. Planting the seedlings in a trench is a common practice. Prepare three- to four-inch deep trenches, the width of a garden shovel, piling the soil to the north or west of the trench so that the maximum amount of light reaches the seedlings in the trench. Space trenches one and a half to two feet apart. At six-inch

intervals in each trench, use a dibble or bulb planter to make three- to four-inch deep holes. Place leek seedlings carefully in the holes, spreading the root hairs. Press one-half inch of soil over the roots and settle them in with a gentle watering. You will minimize the cleaning process in the kitchen in a few months, if you take care to keep the soil from reaching the "leaf joints"! For the first ten days after transplanting the leek seedlings, make sure that the soil is constantly moist. As the young leeks grow, return some of the excavated soil to the trench, to a level below where the leaves "branch". When the trench is filled, you can hill up more soil around each plant.

Some gardeners transplant seedlings into two-inch individual holes, such as those made with a bulb planter. For those of us in the Pacific Northwest where skies are frequently overcast, this might not be the best method, as seedlings get less light in individual holes than in trenches. Other methods of blanching leeks include placing cardboard tubes around each seedling when it reaches index finger size, hilling the soil around the plants, or using boards instead of soil to block the sunlight.

Saving leek seed is fairly straightforward. Leeks are biennial. Most overwinter with very little care from the gardener. They don't cross-pollinate with other members of the onion family. So, grow only one kind of leek; let several of the best specimens flower; allow the seed balls to mature, and harvest them. Use the seed while it is fresh, as it is usually viable for only a year or two.

Sources

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