



SPINACH

Description

Spinach is a leafy vegetable that grows in a dark-green rosette about 8 to 10 inches across. The leaves may be flat or curly, depending on the variety. Cooked spinach has a pungent, earthy flavor and can have a mushy texture; raw spinach is milder and crisp.

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Varieties

Spinach comes in two basic types: Savoy (curly leaf) and flat (smooth leaf). Savoy has crinkly dark-green leaves. Flat-leaf spinach has unwrinkled, spade-shaped leaves and a slightly milder taste than savoy. A third type that is increasing in popularity is the semi-savoy, whose slightly curly leaves provide some of the texture of savoy but are easier to clean. All varieties have the same appearance when cooked.

Nutrient Content

Raw spinach is high in vitamin A (beta-carotene) and a good source of vitamins C and folate. Cooked spinach is high in vitamin A (beta-carotene and folate) and is a good source of vitamin C, riboflavin, vitamin B6, calcium, iron and magnesium. Although spinach is a good source of iron and calcium, oxalic acid (a chemical that is present in the leaves) inhibits the body's absorption of these nutrients. Absorption of iron can be increased by eating spinach with a fruit or vegetable that contains vitamin C.

Availability

The peak season for fresh spinach begins in March through May and September through October - spinach is a cool weather green. Spinach leaves can be refrigerated in a plastic bag for 3 days.

Uses

Spinach leaves that are crisp and bright to dark green are best. The leaves can be refrigerated in a plastic bag for 3 days. Spinach can be served raw or cooked. The flat-leaf variety, with its slightly milder flavor, is generally preferred as a raw salad green. Spinach should be cooked very quickly, either by steaming or sauteing with a minimum of liquid, just until the leaves wilt. The leaves also can be added to soups, casseroles, and stews. A variety of seasonings, such as lemon juice, soy sauce, horseradish, tomato sauce, or nutmeg, add flavor to spinach dishes. Chopped seasoned spinach also makes a flavorful stuffing for mushroom caps or a filling for savory pastries.

Recipe

Spinach Pie

- 1 pound frozen chopped spinach
- 1/4 cup chopped onion
- 4 eggs
- 1 tsp. lemon juice
- 1/4 tsp. pepper
- 1/4 tsp. salt
- 1 (8 oz.) package cream cheese (light or low fat is okay)
- 3/4 cup milk
- 8 oz. grated Cheddar cheese
- 1 unbaked pie shell

Cook and drain spinach (squeeze out water well). Blend in other ingredients except half of Cheddar cheese. Mix well with spinach and pour into pie shell. Bake at 375 degrees for 25 minutes. Sprinkle the rest of the cheese on top and bake until cheese melts, approximately 5 minutes. Yield 6 to 8 slices.

Origin

Spinach probably originated in southwest Asia or the western Himalayas, but wild varieties also grow in North Africa and Iran. The leafy vegetable was first cultivated by the Persians. Its cultivation reached China in the 7th century A.D. and Europe in the 9th century, when it was introduced to Spain by the Arabs, who named it. Spinach is grown and enjoyed in many parts of the world.

Spinach is an annual plant that requires cool, damp weather and rich moist soil. Spinach seed can be planted in early spring or in autumn, depending on the variety. Hardier types will survive the winter in well-drained soils and can be harvested until spring. More tender varieties are planted in spring, as early as February, for summer harvest. Spinach is ready to be harvested about 6 weeks after planting, when the largest leaves are 6 to 8 inches long.