Green Giants

Expand your culinary horizons with a variety of leafy vegetables

These days, among the familiar supermarket greens, such as spinach and watercress, you are likely to find choices such as frisée, mizuna, broccoli raab (rape, rabe or rapini) and bok choy. But many of us pass up collards or kale for the familiar vegetables—and that’s a shame. Leafy greens of all types are surprisingly simple to cook, add great flavor and texture to meals and, with one or two exceptions, are easy on the budget. They’re ultra-low in calories (around 40 per one-cup serving), yet packed with enough nutrients to make them potent health protectors.

Leafy greens are an excellent source of vitamin C as well as beta-carotene, which the National Cancer Institute ranks as a powerful cancer fighter. They’re also high in phytochemicals, substances being studied for their...
Greens Basics

Buying Look for crisp, fresh-looking leaves and a good bright green (or red) color. Yellow or brown is a sign of age. Avoid greens with wilted, decayed or blemished leaves. Stems should look sturdy and freshly cut. For raw salads, buy young greens, which have the sweetest flavor and most tender leaves. Choose bunches with leaves that are small enough to serve whole—that way, they'll be reliably mild-flavored and tender.

Storing Keep greens in a plastic bag in the refrigerator crisper. It's fine if they're damp but they shouldn't be wet, because wetness encourages rotting. Don't wash greens until you are ready to use them. Tender greens will keep one to three days, tougher greens up to five days.

Preparing Greens grow close to the ground, so they can harbor dirt and sand. To clean greens, plunge them into a sink filled with cold water, then swish gently to dislodge dirt. Lift greens from the water, so the grit remains in the bottom. Repeat as needed until the water is clear. If you are cooking greens, leave the washed greens damped (this liquid is especially needed to create steam if you are steaming greens in a covered pan). To use in a salad, dry greens thoroughly in a salad spinner or with paper towels.

ability to strengthen the immune system as well as prevent some age-related diseases, such as macular degeneration, the leading cause of blindness in older Americans. One study found that people who ate two servings a week of spinach or collards had half the risk of contracting the disease as those who didn't eat greens.

Most leafy greens are rich in fiber—soluble fiber, which helps lower cholesterol, and insoluble fiber, which aids digestion—and essential minerals such as magnesium, potassium, iron and calcium. Nondairy eaters take note: Kale, collards and turnip greens are among the leading vegetable sources of calcium. Greens also supply between 10 percent and 25 percent of the RDA for folic acid, which has been linked to preventing some birth defects as well as heart disease. In general, the darker the leaf, the higher the food value.

Greens can be divided into two categories: tender and tough. The tender ones (spinach, chard, arugula and beet greens) have a mild flavor and cook quickly. They're excellent sautéed over high heat in a large skillet, with a little olive oil and perhaps minced garlic. To wilt greens, follow the same procedure, but cover the pan. Cook until limp and bright green—this takes just a few minutes. Finish with a splash of lemon juice, sesame oil, soy sauce or vinegar. Stir-frying and steaming also work well.

Tougher greens—kale, mustard greens, collards and turnip greens—have a stronger flavor that is best diluted by Blanching the leaves in boiling water, which softens them as well. Then they can be sautéed as above, or chopped and used in other recipes. Braising in a seasoned broth is another delicious option; be sure to use the tasty cooking liquid, which is full of nutrients.

All these leafy vegetables benefit from a blast of flavor—from garlic, onions and leeks to lemon juice, flavored vinegar, tomatoes and even wine. The bitterness of some greens, such as collards or turnips, can be offset nicely with sweet flavors, such as raisins and pine nuts, or mild flavors like beans, pasta and potatoes. It's best to add acidic ingredients, such as lemon juice, after cooking or your beautiful greens will turn a drab color.

Aside from the greens offered in the marketplace, there are many more edible varieties that can be foraged for consumption. Dandelion greens, chickweed, purslane, curled dock, wild chicory, wild fennel, nettles and amaranth (not to be confused with the grain) are just some of the goodies you may find growing outdoors. Besides their wonderful zesty flavors, they often surpass their cultivated counterparts in vitamin and mineral content. With luck, we will one day find these wild cousins on the produce counter alongside arugula, baby spinach and mesclun, which once were considered rare, but now are commonplace.
**Greens**

**Arugula**  A pungent, nutty-tasting green with smooth, tender leaves. Perks up all salads, including potato, grain and pasta salads. Also try cooked in pasta sauces, soups and omelettes. Lasts only a day or two; to prolong life, store with roots in a glass of water, leaves covered with a plastic bag.

**Beet greens**  The red-veined leafy tops of beets, these greens have a mild, slightly sweet cabbagelike flavor. Buy them attached to beets (small beets have the most tender greens) or in bunches by themselves. Steam or sauté as a side dish, add to soups such as borscht and stews, or use in vegetable and grain dishes. Can replace spinach or chard in any recipe.

**Bok choy**  A favorite in China, this vegetable has waxy, white celerylike stalks and flowering dark green leaves. Adds mild flavor and crunch to salads as well as stir-fries and soups—its high water content means it cooks very quickly. Baby bok choy is especially succulent.

**Broccoli rabe (rape, rabe, rapini)**  This slightly bitter, medium-sharp flavored green has skinny stems, leafy greens and small bud clusters. All parts are edible. Look for closed florets, without yellowing. Excellent sautéed, braised or stir-fried, or blended and added to pasta sauces.

**Chard**  (Swiss chard) This is one of the mildest-tasting cooking greens, with a beet-sweet flavor. Chard has a thick center rib and large red or green leaves. The stalks have a delicate, celerylike flavor, while the leaves taste like spinach. If the stalks are thick, first remove them and cook for a little longer than the leaves. Sauté, steam or blanch as a side dish, or add to soups, main-dish pies or stews. Try young chard in wilted salads. Chard can replace spinach in most recipes.

**Chicory (curly endive)**  The large, bumpy head has tough, crunchy, bitter-tasting dark green leaves. The inner leaves are tender and less pungent; try mixing them with milder greens in fresh salads. Also try chicory in wilted salads, pasta sauces, soups and stews.

**Chinese cabbage (Napa)**  This cross between celery and lettuce has crinkly, elongated light green leaves on thick, whitish stems. Crunchy and mildly flavored, even slightly sweet, it is good in stir-fries and excellent raw in salads and slaws.

**Collards**  The big, leathery, deep-green leaves have a strong cabbage taste that mellows to mild and slightly sweet if properly cooked. Be sure to cook them long enough to soften the stems or they will be chewy and unpleasant. Choose young, thin-stemmed collards for the sweetest taste. Use as a vegetable side dish or add to soups and bean stews. Available year round, but best in the late fall. Kale is a good substitute.

**Dandelion greens**  One of the most nutritious greens around, available cultured as well as wild. The bright green, jagged-edged leaves have a tart-bitter taste that benefits from pre-blanching. If you pick your own, pick in early spring before the flowers blossom, and be sure they have not been treated with pesticides. The smaller the leaves, the better. Use in wilted salads, pasta dishes, soups, quiches and frittatas.

**Endives**  This slightly bitter green with a sweet edge has broad, wavy, tough-textured dark green leaves on the outside and pale green, tender leaves in the center. The leaves turn silky-soft when cooked. An Italian favorite, it is good in soups, pasta, rice dishes and savory pies.

**Endive**  The fine, lacy leaves are pale green, curly and tender. Their flavor is slightly bitter, and therefore best tempered with milder greens in salads. Also delicious sautéed in a little olive oil and dressed in a mustard vinaigrette for a French-style wilted salad.

**Escarole**  This common salad-bar garnish is in fact as versatile as spinach. The thick, ruffled, blue-green leaves can be tough, but turn tender and almost sweet when cooked. Look for young leaves with stems no thicker than a pencil for the best texture. Kale's mild cabbage taste is good in stir-fries, soups, stews and main-dish pies.

**Mesclun**  A popular salad mixture of young, small greens, including baby lettuces and miniature greens such as chard, endive and arugula. Expensive, but a treat. Use as soon as possible after purchase.

**Mizuna**  A leafy, Japanese mustard green with deeply serrated dark green leaves and thin, juicy white stalks. It adds mild mustard flavor and crunchy texture to salads, stir-fries and Asian soups.

**Mustard greens**  Along with turnip greens, these are considered to have the sharpest bite. The large, bright green, feathery leaves have a peppery, bitter mustard flavor. Best cooked with other milder greens or sweet vegetables to mellow the taste. Small, young leaves can be added to salads for a zesty note. For a less pungent flavor, substitute escarole, kale or chard.

**Pecorino**  Italy's premier winter-salad green, this gorgeous magenta-colored chicory family member has a distinctive bitter bite. Not cheap, but a little goes a long way in mixed green salads. Also good braised, added to stir-fries and sautés, or brushed with olive oil and grilled.

**Pisello**  One of the mildest and most versatile of greens—deal in everything from wilted salads to omelets, soups and quiches. Choose young spinach with small leaves and thin stems over older spinach with big leaves and thick stems. Spinach can be cooked quickly in just the water clinging to leaves from rinsing.

**Romaine**  These light green leaves have a slightly prickly texture and a bitter, pungent taste. In the South, they're traditionally braised in broth for hours. Along with mustard greens, they are one of the most flexible, versatile choices. They can stand in for kale in most recipes.

**Watercress**  The spicy, peppery-tasting leaves and stems add a little crunch to soups and sandwiches. Also good cooked in soups, stir-fries and sauces. Store as for arugula and use soon after purchase.
Spinach and Artichoke Risotto

3 TO 4 SERVINGS  LACTO

Here's a risotto based on the much beloved "Mediterranean grandmother's" combination of artichokes and spinach. Flecked with bits of tomato, it makes a very pretty presentation. Garlic bread would be great on the side.

2 large artichokes
1 lemon half
2 Tbs. all-purpose flour
2 Tbs. fresh lemon juice
¾ tsp. salt
6 cups vegetable broth
2 Tbs. olive oil
2 Tbs. finely chopped onion
1 medium clove garlic, finely chopped
1 lb. spinach, stemmed, rinsed well and finely shredded
1 cup uncooked Arborio rice
(see glossary, p. 95)

½ cup dry white wine
1 medium tomato, peeled, seeded and diced
½ tsp. ground black pepper
¼ cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese

Bring medium saucepan of water to a boil. Meanwhile, prepare artichoke bottoms: Cut off top two-thirds of artichoke; snap off loose outer leaves around base, then cut off stem. Using melon baller, scoop out fuzzy choke in center. Pare any remaining hard green parts. Rub with lemon half as you work to prevent browning. Repeat with remaining artichoke.

Add flour, lemon juice and salt to boiling water; whisk well until combined. Add artichoke bottoms; reduce heat to low and simmer 5 minutes. Drain and cool, then thinly slice. Set aside.

In large saucepan, bring broth, 5 cups water to a boil over high heat. Reduce heat to low and maintain gentle simmer.

In another large, heavy saucepan, heat oil over medium heat. Add onion and cook, stirring often, until tender, about 3 minutes. Add artichokes, garlic and half of spinach and cook, stirring, until spinach wilts and liquid is absorbed, about 3 minutes. Add rice, stirring to coat, and cook, stirring, 1 minute. Increase heat to medium-high, add wine and cook, stirring, until liquid is absorbed, about 30 seconds. Add 1 cup of simmering broth mixture and cook, stirring, until liquid is absorbed. Repeat with remaining broth mixture, 1 cup at a time, adding more only when rice has almost absorbed liquid. (You may not need all the broth mixture.)

When rice mixture has cooked about 30 minutes, stir in tomato, remaining spinach and pepper. Cook and stir until rice is slightly creamy and just tender, about 5 to 10 minutes. Stir in half of Parmesan and adjust seasoning. Remove from heat and let stand 5 minutes. Serve sprinkled with remaining Parmesan.

PER SERVING: 421 cal., 15g prot., 19g total fat (2g sat. fat), 56g carb., 0 g choll., 77mg sod., 5g fiber


ARTICHOKE

Even though artichokes don’t have many edible parts (just the base of the leaves and the fleshy portion at the bottom), they still provide a number of health benefits. One large artichoke (technically a flower bud) is high in dietary fiber, low in calories (47 per serving) and delivers three grams of protein. It's also a great source of two essential minerals: potassium (370 milligrams [mgs.]), known to lower blood pressure, and magnesium (60 mgs.), which is essential for calcium absorption and overall cellular health.

White Bean, Greens and Tomato Gratin

4 SERVINGS  DAIRY-FREE

Served with a crisp green salad, this is a welcome dish any season. To make bread crumbs, whirl two or three slices of day-old French bread in a food processor or blender to fine crumbs.

1 large bunch leafy greens, such as chard, kale or beet greens, or a mixture (about 1½ lbs.)
2 Tbs. olive oil
2 medium cloves garlic, finely chopped
2 cups cooked or canned white beans, rinsed and drained if canned
2 medium tomatoes, peeled, seeded and chopped
½ cup vegetable broth
½ tsp. dried thyme
½ tsp. salt

Preheat oven to 350°F. Grease 9-inch round or 10-inch oval gratin or baking dish. Remove tough stems from greens and rinse well. Stack greens and cut into thin strips.

In Dutch oven, heat oil over medium-high heat. Add garlic and stir 30 seconds. Add greens and cook until tender, tossing often, about 7 minutes. Remove from heat. Add beans, tomatoes, broth, thyme and salt and mix well. Spoon into prepared gratin dish, spreading evenly.

Topping: In small bowl, mix all ingredients. Sprinkle evenly over top of greens mixture. Bake until hot, about 40 minutes.

PER SERVING: 437 cal., 16g prot., 19g total fat (3g sat. fat), 56g carb., 0g choll., 102mg sod., 10g fiber

Mediterranean Rice with Spinach

4 SERVINGS  LACTO

This dish of spinach and rice topped with feta cheese and black olives is extremely simple to make, and therefore lies its elegance. It’s delicious served at room temperature, which means you can prepare it earlier in the day.

3 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil
4 scallions (white and light green parts), thinly sliced (½ cup)
1 medium onion or leek (white part only), finely chopped (¼ cup)
3 Tbs. tomato paste
½ cup uncooked long-grain white rice
10-oz. pkg. spinach, stemmed, rinsed well and cut into thin strips
Garlicky Greens Skillet

4 SERVINGS DAIRY-FREE
This makes a simple but wonderfully flavorful main dish. Yukon gold potatoes add an almost buttery taste—if you can’t find them, use two russet potatoes instead.

1/2 lb. kale or collards
5 tsp. olive oil
1 medium red bell pepper, cut into thin strips
1 medium yellow bell pepper, cut into thin strips
1/2 cup finely chopped onion
2 medium cloves garlic, minced
1 lb. Yukon gold potatoes, peeled and cut into 1/2-inch-thick slices (3 cups)

BRING LARGE POT of lightly salted water to a boil. Meanwhile, strip kale leaves from thick stems; discard stems. Rinse leaves well, then tear or cut them into 2-inch pieces. Add kale to boiling water and cook just until tender, 8 to 10 minutes. Drain well. Coarsely chop kale, place in large bowl and set aside.

In large nonstick skillet, heat 2 teaspoons oil over medium heat. Add both bell peppers and cook, stirring often, until softened, 5 to 8 minutes. Transfer to plate and set aside.

In same skillet, heat 1 teaspoon oil over medium heat. Add onion and cook, stirring often, until softened, about 3 minutes. Add garlic and cook, stirring, 30 seconds. Add onion mixture to kale. Season lightly with salt and toss to combine.

In same skillet, heat remaining 2 teaspoons oil over medium heat. Arrange potato slices in concentric circle over bottom of skillet, overlapping slightly. Sprinkle lightly with salt and pepper. Spoon kale mixture over potatoes, spreading evenly, then top with bell peppers. Sprinkle with salt and pepper. Cover and cook until potatoes are browned and crusty on bottom and tender in center, shaking pan from time to time to prevent sticking, 35 to 40 minutes.

To serve, carefully loosen potatoes with spatula, then cut into wedges.

Bok Choy, Fennel and Spinach

4 SERVINGS DAIRY-FREE
Fresh fennel lends a lovely anise flavor to this hot and tangy recipe. Enjoy it as a side dish or even as an entrée when spooned over fluffy steamed white rice or collard greens.

1/2 tsp. Asian sesame oil
3 medium cloves garlic, thinly sliced
1 dried hot chile pepper
4 leeks (white parts only), thinly sliced diagonally (3 cups)
1 small head bok choy, trimmed and sliced crosswise into 6 pieces
1 bulb fennel, trimmed and thinly sliced (11/2 cups)
2 cups spinach leaves, rinsed well
1 tsp. minced fresh ginger
1/2 cup vegetable broth
1/2 tsp. chopped fresh rosemary
2 Tbs. low-sodium soy sauce

IN LARGE SAUCEPAN, heat oil over medium heat. Add onion, scallions and celery and cook, stirring often, until golden, about 10 minutes. Add 1 cup water and cook, stirring often, for 10 minutes. Stir in greens, tomatoes, cilantro, fennel seeds, salt and pepper and cook, stirring often, for 10 minutes more.

Stir black-eyed peas into greens mixture with 3 to 4 tablespoons water. Cook, stirring occasionally, 10 minutes to combine flavors. Adjust seasoning and serve warm or at room temperature.

IN LARGE SKILLET, heat sesame oil over medium heat. Add garlic, chile pepper, leeks and bok choy and cook, stirring often, until vegetables just begin to soften, about 4 minutes.

Stir in fennel, spinach, star anise, ginger and broth. Reduce heat to low and simmer, stirring occasionally, for 10 minutes. Stir in rosemary and soy sauce. Discard star anise and chile and serve hot.

Mixed Greens and Tomatoes with Black-Eyed Peas

4 TO 6 SERVINGS DAIRY-FREE
Serve this piquant vegetable dish warm or at room temperature for lunch along with good crusty bread and a glass of wine. Feel free to substitute any white beans for black-eyed peas.

2 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil
1 medium onion, chopped (1/4 cup)
3 scallions (white and light green parts), finely chopped (1/2 cup)
2 stalks celery, diced (1 cup)
3 cups tender leafy greens, such as beet greens, chard or spinach, tough stems removed, rinsed well and roughly chopped
2 large tomatoes, peeled and finely chopped
1 cup of black-eyed peas, rinsed and drained if canned
1/2 tsp. ground black pepper
1 tsp. coarse salt