Now that winter's here (and the health scare over packaged spinach has made growing practices safer than ever), there's no better time to rediscover the riches of this leafy green. Unlike more delicate veggies that take a beating when temperatures drop, spinach thrives in frost. "The colder it gets, the sweeter it tastes," explains John Peterson, author of Farmer John's Cookbook: The Real Dirt on Vegetables.

Whether growers pick flat-leaf varieties or those with crinkly textures like other cooking greens, harvesting spinach is intimate business. Extracting tender leaves requires getting down on hands and knees and hand-plucking them from the plant. But despite the delicate treatment it requires, spinach can also have tough grit and should be dunked in cold water and drained at least once to remove sand or dirt. All that washing is worth your while—at only 7 calories per cup, this veggie is an excellent source of fiber, folate and vitamin C, and provides a whopping 20 percent of the recommended daily allowance of vitamin A.

Spinach was first cultivated in ancient Persia, now Iran, where it's still a favorite ingredient in soups, stews and flaky turnovers. It quickly became a staple in cultures and cuisines around the world. Indians use it in pesto-like purées with raw garlic, and Chinese sauté it. The French incorporate it into savory tarts, Italians like it on pizza, and who here in Popeye-land can resist spinach when it's steamed with a squeeze of lemon or a dash of hot sauce? (Though we'll skip the canned variety ... ) The following recipes showcase all spinach has to offer and provide delicious proof that despite the tough weather conditions it endures and the hard times it's had lately in the press, this lush green remains strong to the finish.

**Nutritional Profile**

1 cup raw spinach:
- calories 7, total fat 0g, calcium 30mg, potassium 167mg,
- vitamin A 2813 IU, folate 58mcg

From the USDA National Nutrient Database
THAI SPINACH CUPS
Serves 6 • Vegan 30 minutes or fewer

Choose large spinach leaves for this spicy appetizer—they're firmer, and they naturally curl around the filling. Feel free to add more chili paste if you like more heat in your dish.

Filling
1 Tbs. olive oil
1 small onion, finely chopped (about 1/2 cup)
12-oz. pkg. frozen soy crumbles, thawed
1 cup frozen corn, thawed

2 green onions, chopped (about 1/4 cup)
1/2 tsp. Thai red chili paste, such as Sriracha
1 large bunch spinach leaves separated from stems (at least 12 leaves)

Cucumber Relish
1 cucumber, seeded and diced (about 1 1/2 cups)
1/4 cup roasted, unsalted peanuts, finely chopped
3 Tbs. seasoned rice vinegar

1. To make Filling: Heat oil in large nonstick skillet over medium-high heat. Add onion, and cook 5 to 7 minutes, or until softened. Stir in soy crumbles, corn and green onions, and sauté 1 minute. Add chili paste, and cook 3 minutes more. Season with salt and pepper, and transfer to serving bowl.

2. To make Cucumber Relish: Combine cucumber, peanuts and vinegar in medium bowl.

3. Have guests make their own cups by placing small amount of filling into one spinach leaf and topping it with small spoonful of relish.

PER SERVING: 217 CAL; 15G PROT; 12G TOTAL FAT (2.5G SAT. FAT); 14G CARB; 0MG CHOL; 433MG SOD; 5G FIBER; 4G SUGARS
For perfectly steamed or wilted spinach, follow these 3 steps:

Pack damp leaves (1 lb. = 1 cup cooked spinach) into large pot over high heat, and cover. Water on leaves is enough to steam the spinach.

Turn occasionally with tongs as bottom leaves wilt. Add more spinach to pot when there's room. Spinach is done when all leaves are wilted.

Drain in colander, pressing down with back of large spoon to remove excess moisture. Serve as a side or use in recipes.

2 SPINACH SALAD WITH ORANGES, DRIED CHERRIES AND CANDIED PECANS
Serves 6 • 30 minutes or fewer

Spinach wins the prize for healthy salad greens with a higher content of every nutrient (except water) than most lettuces.

1/4 cup packed light brown sugar
1 cup pecan pieces
4 navel oranges
1 shallot, chopped (about 2 Tbs.)
2 Tbs. balsamic vinegar
2 Tbs. olive oil
1 9-oz. bag baby spinach
1/2 cup dried cherries
1/2 cup crumbled goat cheese

1. Coat baking sheet with cooking spray. Bring brown sugar and 2 Tbs. water to a simmer over medium heat, and cook 2 minutes. Add pecans, and cook 8 minutes, stirring constantly—mixture will look sandy and dry. Spread nuts on prepared baking sheet to cool.

2. Cut and peel white pith from oranges. Cut between membranes to release orange segments into small bowl.

3. Combine shallot with balsamic vinegar in bowl. Whisk in olive oil, and season with salt and pepper.

4. Place orange segments, spinach and cherries in salad bowl, and toss with dressing. Break apart pecans, and add to salad. Sprinkle goat cheese on top, and serve.

PER SERVING: 368 CAL; 8G PROT; 22G TOTAL FAT (4.5G SAT; FAT); 39G CARB; 9MG CHOL; 242MG SOD; 7G FIBER; 25G SUGARS

3 ROASTED PORTOBELLOS AND SPINACH WITH SESAME DRESSING
Serves 6 • Vegan

Want to take something other than a salad to your next potluck? Try this quick side dish that tastes great chilled or at room temperature.

Sesame Dressing
3 Tbs. seasoned rice vinegar
1 1/2 Tbs. low-sodium soy sauce
1 1/2 Tbs. tahini
1 1/2 tsp. light brown sugar
1 1/2 tsp. roasted sesame oil
1 clove garlic, peeled

Roasted Portobello
1 lb. portobello mushrooms, stems removed (about 6 medium)
1 Tbs. canola oil
4 9-oz. bags spinach
2 Tbs. toasted sesame seeds

1. To make Sesame Dressing: Blend all ingredients in blender until smooth.
2. To make Roasted Portobello: Preheat oven to 400°F. Coat baking sheet with cooking spray. Place mushrooms on prepared baking sheet. Brush with oil, and bake 20 minutes. Cool, and slice.
3. Heat 2 Tbs. water and 2 bags spinach in large pot over high heat. Cover, and steam 2 to 3 minutes, or until wilted. Repeat with remaining spinach. Cool, then squeeze out liquid. Toss with mushrooms and dressing. Sprinkle with sesame seeds.

PER SERVING: 142 CAL; 6G PROT; 7.5G TOTAL FAT (0.5G SAT; FAT); 17G CARB; 0MG CHOL; 423MG SOD; 4G FIBER; 4G SUGARS

4 PERSIAN SPINACH SOUP WITH LENTILS
Serves 6

This easy soup is based on ashe reshteh, an Iranian dish that's usually eaten at the Persian New Year for good luck. Using frozen spinach instead of fresh speeds the cooking time and allows you to use a smaller pot—but feel free to substitute 2 cups steamed fresh spinach. This soup tastes even better the next day.

2 Tbs. olive oil
2 medium onions, diced (about 2 1/2 cups)
1/4 cup lentils
1/2 tsp. turmeric
3/4 cups low-sodium vegetable broth
10 oz. frozen chopped spinach, thawed and drained
3 green onions, finely chopped (about 1/2 cup)
1 cup plain nonfat yogurt
1 Tbs. chopped mint

1. Heat oil in large saucepan over medium-high heat. Add onions, and cook 15 minutes, or until browned, stirring occasionally. Transfer 1/4 cup onions to small bowl to cool.
2. Add lentils and turmeric to pot, and sauté 1 minute. Stir in vegetable broth and 3/4 cups water, and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to medium low, and simmer 10 minutes. Add spinach and green onions, and cook 20 minutes more. Stir in pasta, and cook 10 minutes, or until al dente. Season with salt and pepper.
3. Stir yogurt and mint into reserved onion. Season with salt and pepper. Ladle soup into bowls, and serve with dollops of yogurt mixture.

PER SERVING: 171 CAL; 8G PROT; 5G TOTAL FAT (1G SAT; FAT); 25G CARB; 1MG CHOL; 426MG SOD; 4G FIBER; 7G SUGARS

JANUARY 2007
SPANAKOPITA STRUDEL

Serves 6

This Greek favorite gets an appetizing makeover when it's rolled into a strudel instead of layered in a pan.

2 leeks, white and light green parts thinly sliced (about 1 cup)
1 small onion, diced (about ¼ cup)
2 cloves garlic, minced (about 2 tsp.)
¹/₄ tsp. ground nutmeg
2 10-oz. pkg. frozen chopped spinach, thawed
1 Tbs. fresh lemon juice
2 eggs, lightly beaten
4 oz. low-fat feta cheese, crumbled (about ½ cup)
¹/₄ cup grated Romano cheese
12 phyllo sheets, thawed

1. Coat large nonstick skillet with cooking spray, and heat over medium heat. Add leeks, onion and garlic, and cook 5 to 7 minutes, or until soft. Stir in nutmeg, and cook 1 minute more. Add spinach, and cook 5 minutes. Remove from heat, season with salt and pepper, and stir in lemon juice. Transfer to colander, and let cool.

2. Preheat oven to 375°F. Coat baking sheet with cooking spray. Press all liquid out of spinach mixture. Transfer to bowl, and stir in eggs, feta and Romano.

3. Spray 1 phyllo sheet with cooking spray. Stack second sheet on by phyllo on top. Repeat spraying and stacking until you have 6 layers.

4. Shape half of spinach filling into log on phyllo stack, leaving 1½-inch border around edges. Fold short edges over filling, then roll lengthwise into tight log. Place seam side down on prepared baking sheet, and spray with cooking spray. Cut slashes 1 inch apart on top of strudel with sharp knife. Repeat with remaining phyllo and filling. Bake 40 to 45 minutes, or until golden brown. Cool 10 minutes before slicing and serving.

PER SERVING: 256 CAL; 5G PROT; 10G TOTAL FAT (3.5G SAT FAT); 30G CARB; 84MG CHOL; 71MG SOD; 4G FIBER; 3G SUGARS

Fiona Kennedy is happy to be able to find bunches of fresh spinach at the Santa Monica farmer's market, where she shops each week for ingredients to test YT's recipes.