swiss chard

This true wonder of nature is arguably the most beautiful of all the greens—and the most versatile.

Swiss chard fans tend to fall into two camps: leaf lovers and stalk devotees. "My Italian neighbor grows his Swiss chard for the stalks—I grow it for the leaves," says Bob Matthews, owner of gardenersnet.com in Rochester, N.Y. "Next door, they've never eaten a leaf, and over here, we've never eaten a stalk."

Both parts of this member of the beet and spinach family can add color, flavor, and crunch to a wide variety of recipes. The spinach-like leaves work well in salads, stews, side dishes, and even desserts (see recipe for Tourte de Blettes, right). Sliced and sautéed, the wide, ribbed stalks that come in white, red, or rainbow hues make delicious additions to pasta, gratins, casseroles, and veggie medleys.

There are also some pretty strong health reasons to throw a bunch or two of Swiss chard into your grocery basket. With just 35 calories per cup when boiled, it's an excellent source of vitamins A and C, iron, and magnesium.

Just get your chard fix now, while the weather's still cool, advises Matthews. "Chard can become rubbery and bitter in summer heat—spring and fall are when it tastes best," he explains, crediting cooler temperatures with keeping the leaves sweet. So, there's no better time than early spring to toss a Swiss chard salad or add some chopped stalks to a pizza topping. That's something everyone can agree on.

Nutritional Profile
1 cup boiled Swiss chard contains:
calories 35
magnesium 150 mg
fiber 3.7 g
iron 4 mg
vitamin A 10,717 IU
vitamin C 31.5 mg

BY JOYCE SANGIRARDI
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DASHA WRIGHT
TOURTE DE BLETTES
(SWISS CHARD AND APPLE PASTRY)

Serves 6

A specialty from Nice, in the south of France, this dessert surprises anyone outside of Provence or Italy (where they make a similar sweet), because few people think of putting greens in a tart.

7 cups roughly chopped Swiss chard leaves, inner stems removed (1 1/2 lb.)

1/2 cup part-skim ricotta cheese
1/2 cup confectioners' sugar, plus more for sprinkling
1/2 cup plus 1 tsp. egg substitute, divided

1/2 cup low-fat milk
1/2 cup dried currants
1/2 cup plus 1 Tbs. sliced toasted almonds
1/4 tsp. ground nutmeg
1 sheet frozen puff pastry, thawed (1/2 17.3-oz. pkg.)
1 Fuji apple, peeled, cored, and cut into 1/4-inch slices

1. Preheat oven to 375°F. Blanch Swiss chard in large pot of boiling water 15 seconds, or until wilted. Drain, and rinse under cold water. Squeeze out excess liquid. Set aside.

2. Combine ricotta and confectioners' sugar in bowl. Whisk in 1/2 cup egg substitute and milk. Add chard, currants, 1/2 cup almonds, and nutmeg.

3. Cut pastry sheet in half. Roll each half into 10- x 9-inch rectangle on floured work surface. Place 1 piece puff pastry over 8-inch-square nonstick baking pan, and press into sides of pan. Spoon in chard mixture, and arrange apple slices on top. Place remaining piece of pastry on top of apples, and roll edges to seal. Brush with remaining 1 tsp. egg substitute, and sprinkle with remaining 1 Tbs. almonds.

4. Prick pastry top with knife to vent. Bake 45 minutes. Cover with foil, and bake 45 minutes more, or until pastry is golden. Cool on wire rack, and sprinkle with confectioners' sugar before serving.

PER SERVING: 401 CAL; 11 G PROT; 21.5 G TOTAL FAT (4 G SAT. FAT); 43 G CARB; 10 MG CHOL; 280 MG SOD; 3 G FIBER; 20 G SUGARS
2 "RAW" SLAW WITH ASIAN PEAR

Serves 6 • Vegan • 30 minutes or fewer

Tender Swiss chard leaves are ideal in raw cuisine recipes because they are milder than other leafy greens like kale and collards, but less prone to tearing and wilting than spinach.

13 Swiss chard leaves, stems removed, sliced into 1/4-inch ribbons
1 large Asian pear, peeled and grated (3 cups)
4 large navel oranges, segmented and chopped (3 cups)
3 large carrots, grated (2 cups)
1/2 cup chopped cilantro
1/4 cup raw cashews
1/4 cup fresh orange juice
2 tsp. sesame oil
1/4 cup red pepper–seasoned rice wine vinegar
1 tsp. minced fresh ginger

1. Toss together chard, Asian pear, oranges, carrots, and cilantro in bowl.
2. Blend cashews, orange juice, and sesame oil in blender 15 seconds, or until nuts are finely ground. Add rice wine vinegar and ginger, and blend 10 seconds more, or until smooth and frothy. Add to chard mixture, and toss to coat.

PER SERVING: 191 CAL; 6 G PROT; 7.5 G TOTAL FAT (1.5 G SAT. FAT); 30 G CARB; 0 MG CHOL; 448 MG SOD; 7 G FIBER; 17 G SUGARS

3 CHARD AND PEARL BARLEY STEW

Serves 6 • Vegan

Pearl barley has been polished to remove the outer hull (the same way white rice has had its hull removed) and to make the grain more tender and easier to cook. Serve this stew with a sprinkling of your favorite vegan cheese.

2 Tbs. olive oil
1 1/2 lb. Swiss chard, leaves and stems separated and chopped
2 medium leeks, halved lengthwise, light green and white parts sliced 1/4-inch thick (2 cups)
3 medium carrots, peeled and sliced (1 1/4 cups)
2 stalks celery, sliced (1 cup)
1/2 tsp. ground nutmeg
3 cups low-sodium vegetable broth
1/2 cup medium pearled barley
1 cup frozen baby lima beans
1/2 cup chopped fresh cilantro

1. Heat oil in large saucepan over medium-high heat. Stir in chard stems, leeks, carrots, celery, and nutmeg. Cook 7 to 9 minutes, or until vegetables release juices but are still brightly colored, stirring often.
2. Add broth, barley, and 1/2 cups water. Cover, and bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer, covered, 45 minutes, stirring halfway through. Add lima beans and chard leaves. Simmer 10 minutes more, or until lima beans are tender.

PER SERVING: 186 CAL; 6 G PROT; 5 G TOTAL FAT (1 G SAT. FAT); 31 G CARB; 0 MG CHOL; 278 MG SOD; 8 G FIBER; 6 G SUGARS

4 CHARD AND CHEVRE PIZZA

Serves 6

Swiss chard makes a great two-in-one pizza topping with its crunchy stems and tender spinach-like leaves. If you're not a goat cheese fan, try the recipe with shredded fresh mozzarella.

1 1/2 lb. Swiss chard, leaves and stems separated
2 Tbs. olive oil
1 pint (10 oz.) cherry or grape tomatoes, halved (2 1/4 cups)
5 oz. cremini or baby bella mushrooms, cleaned, trimmed, and quartered (2 cups)
1 small red onion, diced (1 cup)
2 cloves garlic, minced (2 tsp.)
1/4 tsp. chili powder
1 13.8-oz. tube refrigerated prepared pizza dough
4 oz. goat cheese crumbles (1 cup)
1/2 cup chopped fresh cilantro

1. Preheat oven to 400°F. Chop chard stems into 1/4-inch pieces. Chop chard leaves into 1/4-inch-wide strips. Set aside.
2. Heat oil in large skillet over medium-high heat. Add tomatoes, mushrooms, onion, and chard stems. Cook 10 minutes, or until vegetables are tender and tomatoes are soft, stirring occasionally. Add garlic, chili powder, and chard leaves. Season with salt and pepper. Cover, reduce heat to medium-low, and cook 2 minutes, or until chard is wilted.
3. Meanwhile, coat baking sheet with cooking spray. Press pizza dough into 15- x 10-inch rectangle on baking sheet. Bake 10 minutes. Top crust with warm tomato-chard mixture, and sprinkle with goat cheese. Bake 15 to 17 minutes more, or until crust is browned and goat cheese is melted.

PER SERVING: 314 CAL; 12 G PROT; 12.5 G TOTAL FAT (5 G SAT. FAT); 41 G CARB; 15 MG CHOL; 730 MG SOD; 3 G FIBER; 8 G SUGARS

grow your own!

Swiss chard is a great addition to any garden, even a flower garden, says Bob Matthews of gardenersnet.com. "Chard grows well in poor soil and shade, and the dark leaves and colorful stems make a decorative filler around blooming plants," he explains. Because Swiss chard resists frost, you can plant it this month (sow seeds one inch apart, then spread to three inches apart) and harvest your first crop for a salad or stir-fry in four to six weeks. The plants will continue to produce tender leaves until December in most parts of the United States. Just be sure to give Swiss chard lots of water during hot summer months to keep it from tasting bitter or soapy.
CAVATAPPI AND CHARD
Serves 6

Corkscrew-shaped cavatappi pasta stands up to Swiss chard stems and provides plenty of surface area for the creamy sauce. Fusilli and penne also work well.

- 1/4 cup pine nuts
- 2 Tbs. olive oil
- 3 large shallots, thinly sliced
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 Tbs. apple cider vinegar
- 1 tsp. ground cumin
- 1 1/2 cups low-sodium vegetable broth
- 6 cups Swiss chard stems, cut into 1-inch pieces
- 1/2 cup heavy cream
- 1/2 cup golden raisins
- 16 oz. cavatappi pasta
- 6 Tbs. grated Locatelli Romano cheese, optional
- Fresh thyme sprigs for garnish, optional

1. Toast pine nuts in dry skillet over medium heat 5 minutes, or until browned and fragrant, shaking often. Transfer to bowl.

2. Heat oil in large skillet over medium-high heat. Add shallots, and cook 5 minutes, or until golden brown, stirring occasionally. Add garlic, and cook 1 minute more. Remove from heat, and stir in vinegar and cumin. Let vinegar evaporate 20 seconds, then return skillet to medium-high heat.

Add broth and 1/2 cup water, and bring to a simmer. Stir in chard stems, cover, and reduce heat to medium-low. Simmer 12 minutes, or until chard stems are tender. Stir in heavy cream and golden raisins, and simmer 10 minutes, or until slightly thickened.

3. Meanwhile, cook pasta according to package directions. Drain, and stir into chard mixture. Transfer to serving bowl, and top with pine nuts. Sprinkle with cheese and thyme sprigs, if desired.

PER SERVING: 506 CAL; 14 G PROT; 17 G TOTAL FAT (6 G SAT. FAT); 78 G CARB; 27 MG CHOL; 113 MG SOD; 5 G FIBER; 14 G SUGARS

Joyce Sanginardi rarely cooked with Swiss chard before this story, but now it finds its way into her cooking more and more ... even into her green breakfast shake.