

MAY – Featured Vegetable: SPINACH



WASH. EAT

(how easy is that?)

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Spinach is a leafy vegetable that grows in a dark-green rosette about eight to ten inches across. Spinach is a low-growing annual that must be replanted each year. The leaves may be flat or curly, depending on the variety. We eat the leaves of the spinach plant either fresh or cooked. Cooked spinach has a pungent, earthy flavor and can have a mushy texture; raw spinach is milder and crisp.

## Facts

The Chinese called it the “Herb of Persia.”

According to figures from USDA’s Economic Research Service, annual consumption of all kinds of spinach (fresh, frozen and canned) jumped 66 percent in the decade between 1992 and 2002. This is mostly due to the availability of pre-cut, bagged spinach.

Chlorophyll, or a group of green pigments found in plants and vegetables, like spinach, can be used to create a phenomenon called “fluorescence,” which is essentially the same phenomenon as a neon light.

Spinach was the first frozen vegetable to be sold for commercial use.

There are 40,000 seeds in one pound. It takes about 600,000 seeds to grow one acre of spinach plants.

## History

Spinach originally came from Persia (now Iran) where it was known as *aspanakh*. The green, leafy vegetable made its way to China in the 7th century, when the king of Nepal sent it as a gift. Spinach was eventually brought to Europe in the 11th century, when it was introduced to Spain by the Moors (Muslims). In fact, spinach was known as “the Spanish vegetable” in England. In the 16th century, spinach became the favorite vegetable of Catherine de Medici of the famous Medici family of the Italian Renaissance. When she left her home in Florence, Italy, to marry King Henry II of France, she brought along her own cooks who could prepare spinach in the many different ways that she liked. Since this time, dishes prepared on a bed of spinach are referred to as *à la Florentine*.

Spinach began being cultivated in North America by the early 19th century. In recent times, it has been popularized by the cartoon character, Popeye, who attributes his amazing strength to a daily diet of the green, leafy vegetable. In fact, when Popeye made his debut on January 17, 1929, spinach became the third most popular

Sources:

5 A Day, Fruit and Vegetable of the Month: <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/5ADay/month/index.htm>  
[Encyclopedia of Foods: A Guide to Healthy Nutrition](#). Dole Food Company: 2002.  
[www.harvestofthemonth.com](http://www.harvestofthemonth.com)

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children's food after turkey and ice cream. Today, more than 94 percent of Americans associate spinach with Popeye.

## Where Grown

Spinach is grown and enjoyed in many parts of the world.

Fresh spinach is available all year. Major supplies come from Texas and California where it grows as a cool winter crop.

## Types

**Flat or Smooth Leaf** - Flat or smooth leaf spinach has unwrinkled, spade-shaped leaves that have a milder taste than the savoy. This variety is commonly used for canned and frozen spinach as well as for soups, baby foods, and other processed foods.

**Savoy** - Savoy has crinkly, dark green curly leaves. The texture is different from the flat leaf but tastes equally as good. Look for fresh bunches of savoy at your local market.

**Semi-Savoy** - Increasing in popularity is the semi-savoy variety, which has slightly curly leaves. The slightly curly leaves have a similar texture to the savoy leaves but are easier to clean. This variety is usually sold fresh. It is also found in processed foods.

## Nutrients

- Raw spinach is high in vitamin A (beta-carotene) and a good source of vitamin C and folate
- Cooked spinach is high in vitamin A and folate and is a good source of vitamin C, riboflavin, vitamin B<sub>6</sub>, calcium, iron, and magnesium

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