

Cool Season Vegetables for your Spring Garden

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America has its roots in agriculture. From the corn fields of Nebraska to the potato fields of Idaho, Americans created an economic and social foundation based on their connections to the seasons and their land through the science and art of agriculture. Over time, the agricultural landscape has changed drastically in our country and many Americans eat food grown thousands of miles away instead of from their local farmer. For gardeners who are interested in eating locally and seasonally grown produce, the opportunities to create a kitchen garden are endless and spring is an exciting season to get started. While it may be a challenge to grow enough vegetables to feed the whole family, gardeners will be rewarded greatly by what their land can offer.

Springtime for gardeners and farmers all over the country is a time of bustling activity. Even if you haven't spent the winter planning your vegetable garden, there is a plethora of cool-season plants to both harvest and get started growing in the springtime. Here in the mid-atlantic states, we are blessed with a 9-month growing season. Once you turn your calendar to the month of March, you can begin to look forward to your first juicy crop of spinach. *Spinacia oleracea*, common garden spinach, like each vegetable for your spring garden, thrives in cooler weather. Spinach is one of the hardiest vegetables, but needs very rich and moist soil. If there is a spring drought, make sure you keep this crop watered because it won't stand dry conditions. Spinach is grown for its tender, buttery, green leaves early in the season and makes delicious salads. You can directly sow the seeds into your garden as soon as the soil becomes workable. And, as with most greens in your garden, make sure you thin them out once they've sprouted to allow more room for maturation.

Among my favorite vegetables to grow is the radish. *Raphanus sativus* is in the family *Brassicaceae*, which is the same family as cabbages, turnips and watercress. Radishes have been in cultivation for hundreds of years and were extremely common in Europe before being introduced to the United States. There are spring varieties as well as winter varieties. *Raphanus sativus* 'French Breakfast' is a delicious cultivar whose seeds you can sow directly in your garden soil around mid-March. This is a pre-1885 French heirloom that has a spicy kick to it. With a red top and a white bottom, it is as attractive as it is delicious. From the name, it is obvious that the radish was traditionally served for breakfast, but what isn't as obvious are the other ways that radishes were used by the French. They used this vegetable to relieve symptoms of the common cold, to fortify the digestive system, and even to draw out thorns from the skin. Americans use the radish sparingly in modern times, but it is such an attractive and easy grower that once you add this to your vegetable garden, you too may find a variety of uses for it.

Considered by many to be one of the great culinary classics of nineteenth-century horticulture, the flat Egyptian beet, *Beta vulgaris*, is another must-have for your cool season garden. Our modern beet is thought to have derived from a wild type growing along the Mediterranean coast, *Beta vulgaris* subsp. *maritima*, and was developed in Germany in the nineteenth century. Perhaps the most well known variety is *Beta vulgaris* 'Crosby's Improved Egyptian' which was introduced into this country in 1869 and trialed by Peter Henderson. This beet has smooth skin, blood colored flesh and is very tender with delicious flavor. Directly sow the seeds into your vegetable garden towards the end

of March. To prevent over crowding, thinning out your beet patch is vital. I enjoy cutting the greens back gradually and including them in my salad along with my spinach greens and radishes!

Did you know that the Scott Arboretum is home to 22 community garden plots where members of our community are cultivating their own vegetable gardens throughout the growing season? In addition to serving the Swarthmore community, several plots are set aside for the campus initiative called Swarthmore Good Food, which is dedicated to raising awareness for sustainable food on campus. Some of the student gardeners are funded and supported by the Scott Arboretum and the produce is sold to the Chester Food Co-op as well as Sharples Dining Hall. The plots are located across the street from the Mary Lyons dormitory.

The vegetables I've described above are just a small handful of the variety of produce you can include in your garden this spring. My favorite part of vegetable gardening is the feeling of satisfaction after cultivating a plant from seed to my dinner plate. There are many great seed suppliers, but my absolute favorite is Baker Creek Heirloom Seed Co. When I receive their catalog each winter, I spend weeks poring over the pictures and varieties of vegetables, fruits, and flowers that harken back to the agricultural history of our country.

References from the Scott Arboretum Library:

Baker Creek Heirloom Seed Catalog, 2008

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