

## Gourmet Greens for Beginners



*Photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: Many winter greens, such as Swiss Chard, are easy for the beginning gardener to grow.*

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As the weather cools, I am reminded that one of the rewards for enduring another sweltering Tallahassee summer is enjoying the benefits of a year round harvest in my winter garden. While our northern neighbors are grieving the end of their growing season, in the fall and winter we can grow salad greens and leafy vegetables that can't abide our summer heat.

Winter greens come in a stunning array of colors and flavors. From French Sorrels' lemony tang to peppery Arugula, and the neon colors of Rainbow Chard to the powdery blue-green of Lacinato Kale. These nutrient-packed greens thrive in our mild winters; some are even sweeter after the frost. Not only are these attractive plants delicious and nutrient-rich, but they are easy to grow even for beginners.

They can be grown in containers with good potting soil, but if you have space, follow these easy steps to start your garden bed:

- 1) Select a mostly sunny spot and remove sod or weeds.
- 2) Prepare the soil. Add a few inches of homemade compost or mushroom compost and mix with existing soil.
- 3) Plant in rows or in small beds no more than 3 feet wide for ease in weeding and harvesting.

- 4) Seed directly into the beds or set out transplants, cover area around transplants or seedbed with a mulch such as pine straw, to prevent weeds.
- 5) Water well at planting time and keep evenly watered after. Continue to pay attention to water needs.
- 6) Once established, begin a fertilization regime. Once the seedlings have sprouted, I use Fish and Seaweed emulsion, then I switch to granular organic fertilizer, such as Plant-tone, that builds the soil while feeding the plants.
- 7) To harvest, clip leaves as needed or whole plants to thin out the bed.

Here are some of the tried and true favorites that serve me well in the garden and on the plate. Enjoy and eat up!

French Sorrels' young, tender leaves add zest when finely chopped over a salad, while the larger leaves can be used for soups and sauces.

Rainbow Chard has a mild spinach flavor and is wonderful steamed, sautéed or stir-fried. I also use the chopped, raw stems and leaves in salads to create a stunning rainbow salad.

Arugula has a unique peppery flavor that adds zing to salads and makes a wonderful winter pesto with garlic and pine nuts.

Bok Choy is a staple in Asian cuisine, tender and mild, I like to add it raw to hot soups before serving, or toss it on a stir fry.

Lacinato Kale, also known as Tuscan or Dinosaur Kale, is a soup staple (think potatoes and spicy sausage). But it is mild enough to eat raw, and makes delicious and nutritious salads.

Collards, the Southern stand-by, are tasty steamed. Try adding some honey and Balsamic vinegar for a tangy a new twist on the old favorite.

Let us not forget the Lettuces! Magenta-spotted 'Forellenschluss', velvety-red 'Four Seasons' and the tender, lime-green frills of 'Black Seeded Simpson'.

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