

SPINACH

PROVIDES A POWERFUL PUNCH AGAINST HEALTH VILLAINS

LOW IN CALORIES, PACKED WITH NUTRIENTS

Vicki Hayman

Spinach is most famously known for being the source of Popeye the Sailor Man's strength.

Popeye would burst open a tin of spinach when faced with trouble. Once consumed, his biceps would bulge and his new-found strength would help him dispatch enemies, particularly his nemesis Bluto, who always seemed in pursuit of the svelte Olive Oyl, Popeye's girl. Oil and spinach do mix, but that's in the recipes below.

There are three major types of spinach, and the big difference is the way they look.

Savoy spinach has thicker, rounder, dark-green curly or heavily crinkled leaves, grows flatter to the ground compared to other spinach, tends to be more

cold-hardy, and becomes sweeter and crisper after a frost. It retains its quality well when shipped.

Flat-leaf or smooth-leaf spinach grows more upright, and because the oblong leaves are flat, they are easier to wash. Baby spinach is a type of flat-leaf spinach, harvested when young.

Semi-savoy is a hybrid between flat-leaf and savoy spinach, with leaves that aren't as crinkled as savoy yet not as smooth as the flat-leaf varieties.

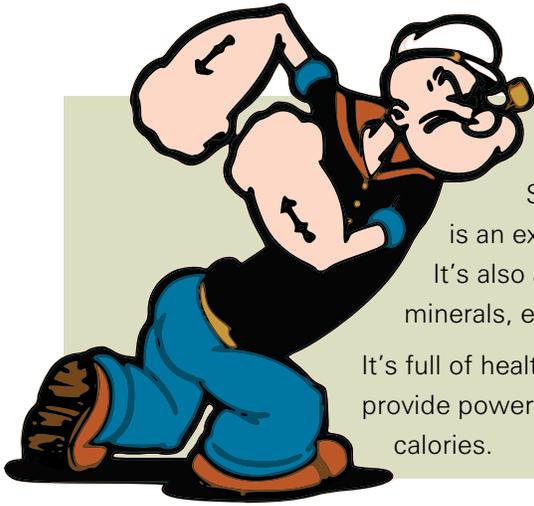
Spinach grows best in the cooler temperatures of spring and fall, although early and late varieties can extend the season into summer and winter. Heat and long days cause spinach plants to bolt, which means they produce flowering stems. Plants that bolt lose their flavor.

How to Grow

Sow seeds as soon as the soil in the garden is workable for a spring harvest, which means February to April, depending upon where you live. Spinach does not need to get a head start on the growing season by being started indoors.

Spinach is not a long-lasting crop, so plan to sow a little every 7 to 10 days for three to





Popeye was a huge spinach fan for good reason.

Spinach is low in calories and fat-free, yet loaded with nutrients. Spinach is an excellent source of vitamins K and A, folic acid, dietary fiber, and protein. It's also a very good source of vitamins C and E, most B vitamins, and numerous minerals, especially calcium, phosphorus, manganese, and iron.

It's full of health-promoting phytonutrients such as carotenoids and flavonoids, which provide powerful antioxidant protection. One cup of raw spinach provides about seven calories.

four weeks. You want the last sowing to mature before long days and hot weather above 75°F set in; count backward, depending on where you live, to determine when you should make that final spring planting. Most spinach varieties take 4 to 6 weeks to mature; however, you can begin harvesting leaves when the plants are younger.

Harvest spinach the same as leaf lettuce, by cutting individual leaves starting with the outer ones, or by cutting the whole plant. Cut about an inch above the crown, where leaves join roots; the plant will put out new leaves that will extend the harvest.

Fresh spinach should be medium to dark green, fresh looking, and have stems with no signs of yellowing. The leaves should not be wilted, bruised, or slimy, and should be free from evidence of insect damage. Look for fairly thin stems – coarse, thick ones indicate overgrown spinach, which may be leathery and bitter. Fresh spinach should smell sweet, never sour or musty. If only bagged spinach is available where you shop, check for yellowed or slimy looking leaves.

In the Fridge

Store spinach loosely packed in a sealed plastic bag (with most of the air removed) in the refrigerator where it will keep for three to five days. Do not wash spinach before storing, as the moisture will cause it to spoil. Spinach is highly ethylene sensitive; to reduce leaf yellowing do not refrigerate with apples, melons, or tomatoes.

Spinach should be washed very well before cooking since the leaves and stems tend to collect dirt and debris. Trim the roots, stems, and separate the leaves before washing. Spinach sold in bags usually has been pre-washed and only needs rinsed. If for use in a salad, dry using a salad spinner or by shaking in a colander. Spinach leaves often have stems attached, which can have a bitter or metallic flavor, so cut or tear off each stem.

How to Cook

If cooking, opt for steaming, sautéing, or microwaving spinach rather than boiling, to preserve the nutrients.

Tip: Don't be shy with portions when cooking spinach. Its high water content means its volume reduces in

size to about a quarter when cooked.

Take care not to overcook, no matter the method. Remove from heat as soon as the leaves begin to wilt. The heat will continue to cook the leaves after transferring them to a plate, wilting any leaves that still look uncooked. Leaving the spinach to cook for any longer causes the leaves to become slimy and makes the bitter flavor more noticeable.

Eat leftover spinach cold or toss with hot food to warm slightly.

Incorporate spinach into home recipes; throw a few handfuls into your favorite smoothie, soup, egg dish, pasta, or casserole. Add spinach to a wrap, sandwich, pita, or flatbread instead of regular lettuce, or use as a salad base. Sauté spinach in a small amount of extra virgin olive oil, crumbled bacon, minced garlic, and season with ground black pepper and freshly grated Parmesan cheese. Serve spinach as a base for grilled chicken or salmon.

Spinach may not give you superhuman strength to fight off villains like Bluto; however, eating spinach has been shown to benefit health in several ways, and it contains high amounts of many powerful nutrients. Without a doubt, spinach is an incredibly healthy food.

Vicki Hayman may not be flexing her biceps right now – although she might be – but we do know she provides powerful nutrition messages in her podcasts. See bit.ly/vickivoice. She is the University of Wyoming Extension nutrition and food safety educator serving northeast Wyoming and can be reached at (307) 746-3531 or at vhayman@uwyo.edu.