

# Swiss Chard

## Fun Facts

- How chard acquired the adjective Swiss in its name remains a mystery, since it has nothing to do with Switzerland! It is also referred to simply as chard. The name chard is reputed to have come from either the French word for cardoon, a different vegetable that resembles an artichoke plant, or from the Latin word *cardus*, for thistle.
- To add to the confusion, chard has acquired a variety of other common names. In English, it's been known variously as silverbeet, strawberry spinach, Roman kale, and leaf beet, among others.
- Chard is a biennial plant, meaning it has a two year life cycle, but it is cultivated as an annual in the vegetable garden and harvested in its first season of growth. Once it begins to flower and set seed in its second year, its leaves turn bitter and unpalatable.
- Both the leaves and stalks of chard are edible. Young leaves may be eaten raw in salads, while older leaves and stalks are generally served cooked.
- Chard is an excellent source of Vitamins K, A and C.



## Growing Guide

This beet relative and Mediterranean native has been cultivated for centuries. Chard provides plenty of nutrition and good taste, along with more heat tolerance than many kinds of greens, so it's a popular choice for gardeners across the county. Some varieties of chard have colorful stems that contrast with its broad green leaves, making it a great choice for edible landscaping, where edible plants are combined with ornamental ones to add beauty and interest to the landscape instead of relegating them to a strictly utilitarian vegetable bed.

## VARIETIES

Cultivars of chard vary mainly by the color of the stems. Some varieties have white stems and leaf veins; some have bright red or yellow; and some come with stems in a mixture of hues, including gold, pink, red, orange, purple and white. Most have savoyed or crinkled leaves.

## SITE

Full sun and fertile, well-drained soil will give the best results. In warm climates, light shade during the hottest part of the day is helpful in extending the spring harvest season.

## **WHEN TO PLANT**

Begin sowing seeds as early as 2 weeks before the average last frost date in spring. Chard seeds are usually sown directly in the garden, but for the earliest harvest plants can be started indoors 6-8 weeks before the last spring frost date, hardened off and set out 2 weeks before the last frost date. Except in the warmest areas, make succession plantings every few weeks up until about 2 months before your average fall frost date. In the warmest parts of the country, make early spring and late summer to fall sowings. Hardy chard plants will weather temperatures down to about 20°F.

## **PLANTING**

Sow seeds about ½ inch deep and 4 inches apart. As with beets, chard “seeds” are actually dried fruit capsules containing multiple seeds. Seedlings sprout in clusters; so no matter how carefully you space out the seeds at planting time, you’ll still need to do some thinning. After seedlings produce their first set of true leaves (what appear to be the second set of leaves), use a pair of small, sharp scissors to snip out all but one in each cluster. Then when plants are 4-6 inches high, thin them again to stand 8-12 inches apart. (Use the tender leaves from this second thinning in a spring salad.)

Chard is also a good crop to grow in containers. A 5-gallon pot is a good size for three chard plants. Or combine chard with flowers and herbs in a half-barrel planter for a decorative and edible display.

## **CARE**

For vigorous growth, feed chard plants with a high nitrogen fertilizer every 4-6 weeks. Make sure plants have a consistent supply of moisture throughout the growing season, especially when the weather turns warm.

## **TROUBLESHOOTING**

**Flea Beetles.** These small, black beetles, which jump like fleas when disturbed, chew numerous small holes in leaves. Cover beds with row cover fabric as soon as seeds are planted to keep beetles away.

**Leaf Miners.** Adult flies lay eggs in leaves that hatch out into larvae that feed within the leaf tissue, creating visible winding tunnels. The best way to avoid damage is to cover beds with row cover fabric as soon as they are seeded to prevent egg-laying.

**Leaf Spot.** *Cercospora* leaf spot is a fungal disease that can infect chard, as well as beets and spinach, causing brown or gray spots with reddish margins. To help reduce problems with this disease, rotate the location of susceptible crops in the garden on a 2-year cycle; clean up plant debris well at the end of the season to get rid of infected residues; make sure to thin plants to ensure good air circulation; and keep leaves dry by using drip irrigation or watering plants overhead in early morning so leaves dry quickly.

## **HARVEST**

You can begin harvesting plants when their leaves are about 6 inches long, usually about 6 weeks after planting. For an extended harvest, break or cut off the outer leaves at their base, leaving the plant's inner leaves to continue growing. You can also let plants grow to their mature size (1-2 feet tall) and harvest the entire plant.

Find out how to make [Swiss Chard, Kale and Feta Salad](#) and other tasty chard recipes from [Vermont Harvest of the Month](#).