

## **Spinach**

Popeye went mad for spinach, but then so should we all.

Spinach is a nutritious delicacy, has a unique flavour and a bright green colour. It is dead easy to grow and is a “simple to cook vegetable”. Spinach can be eaten raw or cooked.

The first record of cultivation was in ancient Persia (modern Iran and Iraq). Records tell us that in Spain, spinach was being grown as early as the 8<sup>th</sup> century.

Our name for spinach is derived from the Persian word ‘ispanai’, which means ‘green hand’. Spinach is a close relative of beetroot (although it looks a lot like lettuce).

Spinach (*Spinacia oleracea*) is a hardy and leafy annual. The edible leaves are somewhat triangular and either flat or puckered. According to the gardening experts spinach is easily grown. If your garden is not big enough or a vegetable patch is too daunting, spinach does very well in containers. Spinach can be grown all year round. Monty Don says “collecting our homegrown harvest of spinach is one of my greatest pleasures”.

Spinach leaves are packed with goodness. Spinach is the “iron” vegetable. A 60 gram serving of boiled spinach contains around 1,9mg of iron, compared to many other green vegetables containing on average less than 1 mg of iron for the equivalent serving.

Although spinach has such a good reputation for containing high levels of iron, the bioavailability of the iron is dependent on its absorption and this is influenced by a number of factors. Some experts reckon spinach is not such a great source of iron because, spinach also contain high levels of oxalates which bind to iron to form ferrous oxalate and remove iron from the body. This could jeopardize the iron absorption from spinach. It is the same oxalic acid that gives spinach its slightly bitter taste. It is worthwhile looking at other nutrients and not only think – spinach equals iron.

Spinach is also an excellent source of calcium, fibre and vitamin C. Let us compare spinach to iceberg lettuce:

Nutrient	Spinach per 100g	Iceberg Lettuce per 100g
Fibre (g)	2,7	1,4
Calcium (mg)	99	19
Vitamin C (mg)	28	3.9
Folate (mcg)	194	56

This is the very reason why it is worthwhile adding raw spinach to your salads. Baby spinach is the preferred choice to serve raw. They taste delicious simply sprinkled with black pepper, lemon juice and a bit of fresh garlic. Spinach can be steamed or stir-fried, or simply be added to soups or casseroles, quiches, vegetable bakes, risottos, sauces and stuffings.

Spinach is very popular in Italy where Florentine dishes have high spinach content.

Remember to buy plenty of spinach as it reduces dramatically on cooking. Approximately 225 g raw spinach is needed for one serving.