

**Watercress**

Watercress has been cultivated since Roman times and has been grown in southern England since the early 1800s. Most watercress eaten in the UK comes from Hampshire, Wiltshire or Dorset. April marks the beginning of the season; lasting well into October.

Watercress is a member of the mustard family and is related to garden cress. It is a fast growing semi-aquatic plant that thrives in slightly alkaline water.

When buying, look for crisp leaves with a deep green colour. Watercress is very perishable but can be kept in good condition for a couple of days by refrigerating it stems-down in a glass of water, covered with a plastic bag.

Broccoli and tomatoes are often hailed as ‘superfoods’, but gram for gram, watercress is a better source of vitamins C and E, iron, calcium, magnesium and zinc. Only raw broccoli has more vitamin C and magnesium – but how often is raw broccoli eaten in the UK?.

One serving of watercress (80g) provides almost 90% of the recommended amount of vitamin C.

Watercress is packed with beta-carotene and vitamin A - important antioxidants that are also needed for healthy skin and eyes. Watercress contains more than four times more beta-carotene than broccoli and tomatoes.

Comparison of selected nutrients provided by an 80g portion of watercress, broccoli and tomato

	<b>Watercress (raw)</b>	<b>Broccoli (raw)</b>	<b>Broccoli (boiled)</b>	<b>Tomato (raw)</b>
<b>Calories (kcal)</b>	18	26	19	14
<b>Protein (g)</b>	2.4	3.5	2.5	0.6
<b>Fat (g)</b>	0.8	0.7	0.6	0.2
<b>Fibre (g)</b>	1.2	2.1	1.8	0.8
<b>Beta-carotene (mcg)</b>	2016	460	380	451
<b>Vitamin C (mg)</b>	50	70	35	14
<b>Vitamin E (mg)</b>	1.17	1.04	0.88	0.98
<b>Calcium (mg)</b>	136	45	32	6
<b>Iron (mg)</b>	1.8	1.4	0.8	0.4
<b>Zinc (mg)</b>	0.6	0.5	0.3	0.1
<b>Magnesium (mg)</b>	12	18	10	6

Watercress is bursting with a whole host of other phytochemicals including lutein, zeaxanthin and quercetin.

Countless research has highlighted how different nutrients and phytochemicals work best as a team. Vitamins C and vitamin E have an antioxidant role but also help enhance the benefits of phytochemicals too. This is one of the reasons why eating a variety of different fruit and vegetables is so beneficial to our health. It may also help to explain why nutrient-packed

green leafy vegetables, like watercress, have been so strongly linked with maintaining good health.

Watercress is probably best known as a classic ingredient for soup. But its distinctive mustardy flavour can help pep-up a wide range of dishes.

Try it hot in sauces, teamed with pasta, baked with fish or in a stir-fry - when cooked it has a milder flavour. Watercress combines well with strong flavours such as garlic, chilli, soy, ginger and onion, and here its flavour is mellowed.

When served raw, it adds a peppery bite to salads and sandwiches (a traditional favourite is with Marmite!). Juicing is another great way to optimise intake, and gives carrot-based drinks a lovely bite.