Harvest of the Month | Fact Sheet

Leafy Greens

Leafy greens are plant leaves eaten as vegetables and come in a variety of tastes and textures. Many can be eaten both raw and cooked. Leafy greens include various types of lettuce (e.g. romaine, bibb, butterhead, Boston, arugula, spring mix, red leaf, green leaf, etc.) as well as spinach, Swiss chard, watercress, collard greens, mustard greens, turnip greens, and kale.

Did you know?

Swiss chard was first grown in Italy, but was named by a Swiss scientist.

Collard greens, mustard greens, and turnip greens are popular in Southern US cuisine. They were introduced in North America when the first Africans arrived in the early 1600's and grew them for themselves and their families throughout times of slavery.

Kale ranges in color from white-green and yellow-green to blue–green and violet. Some varieties were developed for ornamental purposes.

Selection

For lettuce and spring greens, look for bright–colored leaves. Mature spinach should have broad, crisp, dark green leaves. Baby spinach leaves are smaller and thinner. Swiss chard should have deep–green leaves and colorful red, pink, orange, yellow, or white stems. Collard greens, mustard greens, and kale should be dark green and have a crisp texture.

Storage

Ideally, lettuce should be stored at as close to 32 °F as possible with a relative humidity of 98 to 100% and some air circulation. Lettuce stored at refrigeration temperatures closer to 41 °F and below has a shelf life of approximately five days. Do not freeze lettuce. Do not store lettuce in dry storage areas. For maximum shelf–life, store lettuce in air tight containers away from ethylene gas–producing items such as apples, grapes, and berries because lettuce is very sensitive to this gas and will develop spotting and soft rot within 24 hours. Store, hold, and serve lettuce at 41 °F or below at all times. Do not allow lettuce to come into direct contact with ice at any time during storage, handling, or serving.

Handling

If pre–packaged greens are labeled "ready to eat," "triple washed," or "no washing necessary" they do not need to be washed again unless specifically directed on the label. All other leafy greens should be thoroughly washed before eating, processing, or cooking.

Use lettuce as soon as possible because it is a very perishable product. Avoid using leafy greens with visible signs of decay or damage. Remove unusable portions or discard entire head. Wash lettuce just prior to serving under cold, running water. Strip coarse leaves from heads prior to washing. Do not immerse or allow to soak in water. Separate the leaves of Romaine lettuce during washing to remove sand and debris.

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Nutrition

Most leafy greens are rich in many nutrients, such as vitamin A, vitamin C, antioxidants, fiber, folate (a B vitamin), vitamin K, magnesium, calcium, iron and potassium. These nutrients perform a variety of functions in the body, including promoting good vision and healthy bones, supporting immune function, acting as antioxidants that may help prevent certain cancers, and regulating blood pressure, blood sugar and blood cholesterol.

School Meal Connection

Most leafy greens are considered dark green vegetables in the school meal lunch pattern including spinach, Swiss chard, watercress, collard greens, mustard greens, turnip greens, kale, and most types of lettuce. (Iceberg lettuce is in the "other vegetable" category since it does not have the nutritional value of other leafy greens.)

Harvest Season

Spring greens such as arugula and baby kale are harvested in Pennsylvania in April and May with a late season harvest in August through October. Collard greens, mustard greens, and kale have an early harvest season in May and a late season in October to the end of November. Spinach is harvested in May and June with a late crop from August through October. Leaf lettuce, such as romaine, green leaf, and red leaf lettuce is harvested from June through October. Swiss chard is harvested in July through September. Many leafy greens are also grown hydroponically extending their availability beyond the traditional harvest season.

Finding Leafy Greens

Child Nutrition Program operators may be able to find local leafy greens in a variety of ways. Check with your produce distributor to learn what they have available. You can search for products through the PA Preferred website or connect with local producers through produce auctions or farmer's markets.

Preparation

There are many ways to enjoy leafy greens including the following:

Salads: Use leafy greens such as romaine lettuce, baby kale, spinach, and arugula in salads along with other salad vegetables. Consider tossing together a salad made half with familiar lettuce and half with a dark green one to gradually introduce the leafy greens.

Soups: Leafy greens with tougher leaves such as collard greens, kale, or mustard greens can be added to soups.

Sandwiches/Subs/Wraps: Try leafy greens in place of iceberg lettuce.

Stir-fry: Add chopped spinach or kale to a favorite stir fry recipe.

Steamed: Collard greens, mustard greens, kale and spinach can be steamed until they're slightly soft.

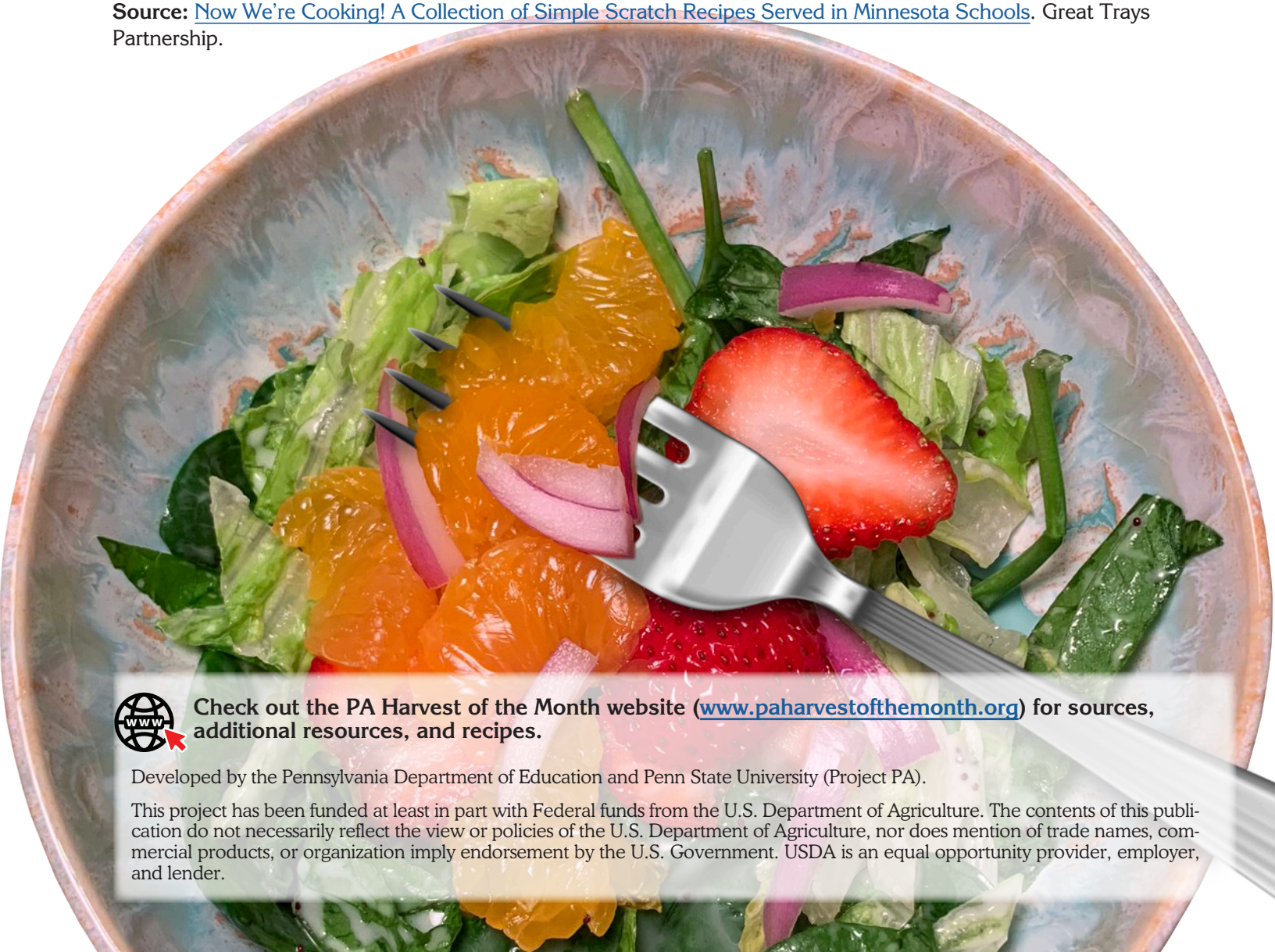
In an omelet: Add steamed spinach to an omelet for a boost in color and nutrients.

Recipe | Spring Salad Mix

Number of portions: 100
Portion size: ½ cup
Credits: ½ cup provides ⅛ cup dark green vegetable and ⅛ cup fruit.

Ingredients	Amount	Instructions
Red onion, julienned	2 ¼ cup	1. Mix together the onions, strawberries and mandarin oranges. Store in cooler until ready to use.
Strawberries, thawed and drained	8 ⅓ cup	
Mandarin oranges, drained	4 ¼ cups	
Dressing:		2. Using a whisk, mix together the lemon juice, vinegar, poppy seeds, sugar, and vegetable oil.
Lemon juice	¾ cup + 1 ½ tsp	
White wine vinegar	1 cup + 2 tbp	
Poppy seeds	2 tbsp + 2 ⅓ tsp	
Sugar	2 ¾ cups	
Vegetable oil	2 tbsp + 2 ⅓ tsp	
Baby spinach, fresh	3 lbs 2 oz	3. Combine the lettuce and spinach.
Romaine lettuce, chopped	4 lbs 3 oz	4. Just before serving, toss lettuce mixture with dressing. Turn into serving bowl and top with fruit mixture.

Source: Now We're Cooking! A Collection of Simple Scratch Recipes Served in Minnesota Schools. Great Trays Partnership.



Check out the PA Harvest of the Month website (www.paharvestofthemonth.org) for sources, additional resources, and recipes.

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