

Why Not Leeks?

I don't get it. I just don't understand why these delightful alliums get so little culinary attention in this country. Perhaps the reason is availability or quality or heritage, but regardless of the reasons it too bad that we ignore one of the tastiest and easiest to grow members of the onion family. Well, now that you know my bias, lets get down and dirty with leeks.

The soil and climate here are close enough to optimum to allow you to grow leeks year round with no particular fuss or babying. In fact, I have been experimenting with letting the leeks do their own propagation for a couple of years now – with considerable success yielding a constant supply with little to no work. I do have to keep them weeded – sort of.

Just the basics

There are two categories – summer and winter leeks. Summer leeks mature in 70-90 days, taste great when picked young (plant them densely and eat the thinnings) and they are more cold sensitive than winter leeks. Winter leeks mature in about 120-150 days, taste great when they reach pencil size are very cold hardy and blue-green in color.

The most common “grocery store” leeks here are the Giant Musselburgh. I suspect because they travel and store with less loss than more tender varieties. Speaking of storage – did you know that commercial leeks are stored at 32 degrees F for 2-3 months? Or that you can store them in the frig for about a month, where they will continue to grow, diminishing their nutrient quality? But if they are growing in your own garden, why not just store them in the ground?

The Dutch first settled Musselburgh, Scotland in the 14th century. Tradition has it that the Musselburgh Leek was developed there from stock acquired from France or Holland and used to develop the Musselburgh Flag, probably late in the 18th century, and variants of this variety eventually gave rise to the London Flag (Weaver, Heirloom Vegetable Gardening, 1997).

When to plant

Just about any time when the seeds can germinate at 68-78degrees F and the seedlings can grow with daytime temperatures to the low 80's. Fall is a great time to begin leeks either directly sown or in flats for transplanting. If you plant in late fall and don't use row covers, the plants will remain small but set good roots during winter and take off when the soil warm up. With row covers you can be eating small leeks in mid-winter. I also sow leek seeds in the Lima Bean beds during summer where they have a shaded and cool place to germinate and grow until frost takes out the beans. But without a microclimate, leek seedlings will go dormant and get stunted in the summer heat.

How to plant

Self-propagation tends to be messy and unorganized – go figure, but it doesn't require a lot of effort on my part. It will yield a crop of unequal sized leeks since the plant just doesn't space its seeds well. Planting in beds not rows works well for me since I sow seeds thickly and eat the thinnings. If you want uniform and optimum sized mature plants follow the commercial spacing instructions – such as those on the seed packs.

If you are transplanting – trim off 1/3 of the roots and 1/3 of the tops to reduce transplant shock and stimulate root growth. I use a pencil to make a hole deep enough to take the transplant up to

the first leaf – do not transplant them deeper than that. To make transplanting faster and easier try seeding them in cell packs – four seed to a cell and transplanting each cluster of four as one plant – just increase the spacing between clusters to allow more root room. You can also handle them 2-up or 3-up if preferred and adjust spacing accordingly.

How to harvest

My method of harvesting depends on spacing and age. Early on the young plants are pulled out to allow more root room for the faster growing one. Later on the largest ones are harvested by slicing down through the root mass around the stalk with a sharp knife. That lets me remove them without disturbing the smaller leeks nearby.

Growing your own seed

So easy to do, that there's literally nothing to it. Leeks are biennials and will normally bloom the second year – unless planted early enough in fall to be vernalized by winter cold temperatures. Then they will bloom the first year. If you plan to save seed, grow only open pollinated varieties and grow only one variety at a time or do alternate day caging to control crossing. Flies are the major pollinators so if you have more than one variety blooming at a time you can end up with something else. However they will not cross with bulbing and bunching onions or shallots.

Be patient. Leek seeds take a long time to mature – so leave the flower head alone until you see the dark seeds formed, then remove and dry it before cleaning the seed. Seed will remain viable for 2-3 year in a dry, cool environment.

After cutting the seed head, leave that old leek alone and there will sprout up a cluster of small leeks around the base. Mature leeks form bulbs at the base that generate more leeks, similar to garlic. So self-propagation is easy with both seed and bulbs perpetuating the species.

To be continued

That covers enough to get started planting and growing. Look for more next month about companion planting and leek cuisine. For more about planting and culturing leeks (with pictures), check out the Knowledge Base section of my web site – www.darrolshillingburg.com.

Till next month,

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