

Leeks

© Annette McFarlane

The Waiting Game

While leeks are generally a hardy, pest and disease free crop, they are not for the novice gardener. Frustratingly slow growing, you can expect them to occupy the same space in your garden for six months or more before your crop reaches maturity. Patience is something that leek growers need to have plenty of, but connoisseurs of this delicately flavoured vegetable believe this crop is definitely worth the wait!



Botanical Name: *Allium ampeloprasum var. porrum*

Family: Amaryllidaceae

Climatic Range: Leeks are generally hardy across a wide range of climates, but optimum growth occurs at temperatures between 13-24 degrees Celsius.

Planting and Harvest: Leeks require a long growing season, requiring from 18-25 weeks to mature from seed. In cool climates they are best planted from September to March. These crops will reach maturity during late autumn and winter. In subtropical and tropical regions best production is achieved by planting during the cooler, drier months from March through until July. Crops can be progressively harvested before the onset of the hot, wet summer weather. Unlike onions, leeks are not daylength sensitive, so despite their tolerance of cold conditions, gardeners in warm climates will tend to find it easier to grow a crop of leeks than a crop of onions.

Leeks are naturally biennial plants, producing vegetative growth during the first year, then flowering and producing seed during the second. Most garden varieties are grown and harvested within the first growing season and treated as annuals. Leeks can be harvested and eaten at any size, but generally require a five to six month growing season to reach full maturity. They are popular with many gardeners in cold climates as they can be grown and harvested throughout the cooler months of the year when other vegetables may be in short supply.

All Wrapped Up

The swollen stem is actually a collection of tightly wrapped leaves that grow from 0.5 to 0.75 m in height. Leeks are related to, but can be distinguished from onions by their foliage. The leaves of leeks are broad and flat with a V shaped fold, while onions have rounded, hollow leaves. Leeks lack the pungency of onions and are milder and sweeter in taste.

Varieties

Musselburgh is probably the best known variety. It is suitable across a wide variety of climatic zones and soil conditions, producing thick, white stems. *Welsh Wonder* is popular with commercial growers due to its fast maturity.

In very cold, frosty climates it is essential to select varieties adapted to the cooler growing conditions. Varieties intolerant of the cooler conditions will bolt to seed prematurely when grown in climates to which they are not suited. As a general rule, leeks with blue-green leaves tend to be more tolerant of frost and cold.

Carentan Giant is an old European variety particularly favoured for cool climates. *King Richard* also noted for its cold tolerance. It is tall growing and fast maturing. The foliage of French heirloom variety, *Blue Solaise*, turns a distinctive blue green colour during the cold weather. *The Lyon* is an old French market garden variety.

Sutton's Prizetaker produces long, thick, white stems and is favoured by competition gardeners because of its gigantic proportions. *Royal Mammoth* is a multiplier type that produces plenty of suckers that can be replanted for a continuous harvest.

Unnamed varieties of multiplier, perpetual or perennial leeks are often available through mail order catalogues and permaculture and herb nurseries. They are well adapted to warmer climates, can be harvested and divided throughout the year and are popularly grown as perennials by many home gardeners. Multiplier leeks are generally milder in taste than other varieties of leeks. They are a perennial option for gardeners in warm regions who find their climate unsuitable for onion cultivation.

Starting from Scratch

Leeks may be grown from seed or purchased as seedlings. Germination requires temperatures above 7 degrees Celsius and seeds must be pressed into close contact with the soil in order to germinate well. Seeds can be sown directly into prepared garden beds or sown into punnets for later transplanting. Avoid sowing seeds too thickly, as this will make it more difficult to thin and plant out the seedlings without damage.

Around six to eight weeks after germination seedlings that have been directly sown can be thinned, while seedlings still in punnets or pots can be planted out. Trimming the tops and tails of seedlings with sharp scissors will reduce the stress of transplanting. Leeks are best planted at around 20cm spacings. Allow at least ten plants per adult member of the household if room permits.

Divide and Multiply

Multiplier leeks are easily propagated from the young seedling offshoots that develop at the base of each plant. Use a garden fork to lift the entire plant from the soil and gently shake off the bulk of the soil. Harvest the largest of the leeks for the kitchen, carefully separating the young developing leeks from the parent plant for immediate replanting into a newly prepared bed. Multiplier leeks should be harvested and divided on a regular basis or plants will develop a multitude of smaller competing shoots that fail to develop into a worthwhile harvest.

Its Best to Blanch

While all parts of the leek plant are edible, the upper green portion of the foliage that is exposed to the sun tends to be tougher and less flavoursome than the white, lower section of the plant. It is common practice therefore to blanch the stems of leeks to enhance their tenderness and flavour. Blanching leeks also means that a greater proportion of the stem can be used. In this case the term blanch means to excluding sunlight from the base of the plant. Plants can be blanched up to the point where the leaves first form their V-shaped parting from the stem. It is best to consider the blanching method you intend to use prior to planting. There are several options.

Up To Their Necks

A simple technique is to drop each seedling into wide 15cm deep holes spaced 20cm apart. Water the seedlings to settle them in rather than back filling. Progressively fill the holes to facilitate blanching as the seedlings mature.

Into the Trenches

Another alternative is to plant your leek seeds or seedlings into a 20cm deep trench. Blanch the developing plants by gradually back filling the trench, covering the base of the plants as they grow.

Moving Mountains

Blanching may also be achieved by creating little mountains of soil around each plant in the same way to potatoes and sweet potatoes are hilled to prevent exposing developing tubers to the sun.

Compost and mulch can be used to hill around plants providing it effectively excludes all sunlight and does not retain excessive moisture around plants.

Clean Skins

Soil can tend to accumulate within the folds of the leaves, making cleaning and preparation of the harvested leeks more time-consuming. Newspaper or milk carton sleeves placed around each leek can help to keep the soil from collecting within the leaf folds and making for a cleaner harvest.

Growing Your Own

Leeks prefer a moderately fertile, well-drained soil with a pH of 6.5-7.5, but perform in any reasonable soil. Avoid preparing the soil too richly in frost prone areas as this makes the growth soft and therefore more susceptible to frost damage. Leeks are one of the few vegetables that will tolerate semi-shaded conditions. Water developing plants regularly, particularly during hot, dry weather.

While there is no reason why leeks cannot be grown in pots, you can probably grow a succession of other crops in the time it takes one pot of leeks to reach maturity. Where space is at a premium, it is probably a crop you should purchase rather than grow yourself.

When The Wait Is Over

Commercially leeks are harvested when they have a blanched section 10-15 cm in length and a least 2.5cm in diameter, but home gardeners can harvest them at any stage that they are considered large enough. Leeks can be left in the ground through until early spring in cold climates, but will tend to rot in tropical climates during the wet season if left unharvested. The longer mature plants are left unharvested, the tougher they will tend to become. The base of blanched plants may be a considerable depth below the soil surface so a garden fork is generally required to unearth the harvest. In cool climates two or more plantings will provide a progressive harvest.

Snail Heaven

Leeks are largely free of pest problems but snails and slugs can take up residence in paper or other materials used to keep soil from coming into direct contact with blanched stems. Any insect damage that occurs to the foliage is largely cosmetic, but can tend to indicate that plants are stressed in some way.

Saving Seed

Leeks take up to two full growing seasons to produce flowers and set seed. Avoid collecting seeds from plants that bolt prematurely as this tends to indicate that they are not climatically adapted to your region. This bolting characteristic will also tend to be inherited.

The pink or white globular flower heads form on impressive stems that rise to over 1metre tall. It is advisable to stake the developing flower and seedheads, as they can tend to become top heavy, particularly during wet weather.

Insects will cross-pollinate different varieties of leeks, but leeks will not cross with onions flowering at the same time. Loose pantyhose or a bags made from muslin cloth can be placed over different varieties on alternate days to prevent cross-pollination by insects.

When the seedheads are ready for collection the individual triangular black seeds become visible within the dry papery head. Place harvested seedheads into a paper bag to facilitate further drying. Shaking or rubbing the seedhead once drying is completed easily dislodges the seed. Leek seeds have a comparatively short viability and should be used within two to three years. Seed bearing plants are usually too old, tough and tasteless to be suitable for consumption.

Like onions, leeks can be planted to discourage insect pests from attacking other plants. The striking architectural foliage of the leek looks as much at home in the ornamental flower garden as it does in the vegetable plot. The striking flower spikes are an added bonus.

Leeks are the national symbol of Wales. When King Cadwallader achieved victory over the Saxons in AD 640 it is said that his troops distinguished themselves from the enemy by wearing leeks in their hats. The leek is now symbolized on the badge of the Welsh Guards, who receive them ceremonially each year at a St David's Day parade.

Burns and insect bites were traditionally relieved by rubbing them with the juice of a leek.

When Chinese gardeners and cooks discuss Chinese leeks (*Allium tuberosum*) they are generally referring to a robust variety of what many Western gardeners know as garlic chives.

French gardeners traditionally plant both onions and leeks the week before Easter on Palm Sunday.