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Get to know LEEKS

Question: I want to add some variety to my garden and my cooking. Are leeks a good choice?

Answer: An onion cousin, the leek is a versatile vegetable, a cultivar of *Allium ampeloprasum* (Porrums group), the broadleaf wild leek.

A cultivar is a plant variety that has been produced in cultivation by selective breeding. Leeks, onions, shallots, garlic and chives are all members of the *Allium* family. Leeks are commonly subdivided into two groups:

1. Summer leeks, which are intended for harvest in the season when planted
2. Overwintering leeks, meant to be harvested in the spring of the year following planting. Overwintering types tend to be larger and more strongly-flavored than the summer leeks.

Leeks have a delicate onion-like flavor that makes them perfect for eating in salads or soups. While best known for their part in tasty leek and potato soups, they are also delicious steamed like asparagus, oven-roasted or



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Ask a Master Gardener

chopped in quiche.

Leeks have a more subtle flavor while green onions a sharper one. Another difference between leeks and green onions is their thickness. Leeks have a thick base with flat leaves at the top. Scallions and green onions simply differ because of their age.

Scallions are younger than green onions, harvested at an earlier stage of their growth. You can tell them apart by the width of the white bulb at the plant's base.

Even though the whole leek plant is edible, the white and light-green parts are best for cooking. The dark-green tops have a tendency to be tough, but can be used for flavoring stocks and soups. Leeks are more likely to be sweet and mild and gentle on the digestive system.

Unlike onions, leeks don't

produce bulbs, but store their flavor in thick, juicy stems that look similar to giant scallions.

Leeks grow nicely in raised beds as well as in-ground. Frost-tolerant leeks thrive in cool to moderate weather. Plant leeks in the early spring and fall when it is cool. Space leeks 6-inches apart in nutrient-rich, well-drained soil.

Leeks must be covered from the sun in order to produce a tender white stem, so plant them in deep holes, adding soil back so it comes up to the base of the first green leaf. They need lots of nitrogen and consistent soil moisture. As the leeks grow, mound the soil around the stems, beginning when stems are 1 inch thick.

One of the wonderful benefits of gardening is the variety of vegetables we can introduce to our families. Planting new vegetables to use in our kitchens is such a joy as well as a bargain.

Leeks are full of flavonoid antioxidants, minerals and vitamins. Vitamins A, K, manganese, Vitamin B6, iron, folate and Vitamin C are but one mouthful away. Additionally, as a great source of calcium



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and iron, leeks can have an important place in our diet.

Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at douglasmg@

oregonstate.edu or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.