



Vegetables for Wellness: Kentucky Greens

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Nothing sounds and tastes more like the South than Kentucky greens, although greens are also gaining popularity in other parts of the country. From May through June and then again from September through November, Kentuckians can enjoy the freshness and flavor of locally grown greens. If you do not have a garden of your own, visit your local farmers' market, which generally offers, along with other fruits and vegetables, greens picked at the peak of the season.

We used to think of greens as a salad of iceberg lettuce. Today, greens run the gamut from iceberg lettuce to cooked collards and include beet and turnip tops, Swiss chard, chicory (curly endive), collards, dandelion and mustard greens, kale, endive, escarole, parsley, rape, spinach, and watercress. Common cooking greens include collards; kale; and beet, mustard, and turnip greens. Many kinds of greens are available year-round. *Vegetable Cultivars for Kentucky Gardens—1999* (ID-133), a publication of the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture Cooperative Extension Service, has more information on successful Kentucky varieties. It can be viewed on the Web at <www.ca.uky.edu/agc/pubs/agpubs.htm>.

Nutrition Facts

Dark green leafy vegetables are packed with vitamins that promote health, and greens are a major source of vitamins A and C. Vitamin A is needed for vision, normal growth, reproduction, and a healthy immune system. One serving (½ cup) of greens can supply up to 50 percent of our daily need for vitamin A. Vitamin C, also known as ascorbic acid, plays a vital role in fighting infection, keeping gums healthy, and healing wounds. A serving of greens can supply up to 30 percent of our daily need for vitamin C. Both vitamins A and C are also antioxidants that may reduce the risk of chronic disease, and they both contain phytochemicals that fight disease.

Greens also provide about 20 percent of our daily need for calcium, and that can make them important for people with lactose intolerance. Greens are also low in calories—a half-cup serving contains 20 to 30 calories. These are good reasons to try to consume all the greens that come in from the garden or to buy plenty from the local farmers' market.

Selection

Regardless of the type of greens you choose, look for bright green leaves that are fresh, young, moist, and tender. Leaves that are injured, torn, dried, limp, or yellowed indicate poor quality and thus poor nutritional value. Avoid greens with coarse stems that may result in excess waste. Farmers' markets usually have a good selection of greens, allowing you to purchase enough for dinner or freeze for the same fresh taste in winter. Depending on the type, one 12-pound bushel of greens will supply 8 to 12 frozen pints. When selecting greens for cooking, remember they cook down to three-fourths or less of their original volume. One pound of kale yields about 2½ cups cooked; 1 pound of mustard greens yields 1½ cups cooked.

Storage

Store greens in the coldest section of the refrigerator for no more than two to three days. After that, the flavor of some greens can become quite strong, and the leaves will go limp.

Preparation

Wash greens well in lukewarm water or swirl them in lukewarm water in a large bowl (dirt will sink to the bottom of the bowl). Remove any roots, rough ribs, and the center stalk if it is large or fibrous. To use greens in salads, thoroughly drain and dry them. This allows the salad dressing to

stick to the leaves. Allow about 8 ounces of greens per serving. Mild-flavored greens such as chard, kale, or spinach should be steamed until barely tender. Strong-flavored greens such as collard, mustard, or turnip greens need longer cooking in a seasoned broth. To avoid bitterness, blanch strong-flavored greens before adding them to soups and stews.

Basic Green Salad: Wash and dry 1 bunch arugula, 1 small head radicchio, 1 small head Boston lettuce, and 12 ounces fresh spinach. (One bunch of romaine lettuce may be substituted for the arugula and radicchio.) Into a large salad bowl, tear the greens into bite-size pieces. Drizzle with desired dressing and serve immediately.

To cook: Add washed greens to a medium saucepan with 1/4 inch of water in the bottom of the pan. Salt if desired, using 1/2 teaspoon salt for every pound of greens. Bring the water to a boil. Cover and cook until tender. For leafy greens, cook 1 to 3 minutes, until they are wilted. For other greens, cook until they are crisp-tender (about 5 to 10 minutes). Many seasonings and herbs are available that will enhance the flavor of greens without adding sodium. Try allspice, lemon, onion, nutmeg, or vinegar. Or, braise the greens by adding 1/4 cup olive oil and 1 to 2 cloves of minced garlic to 1 pound of greens and then cook them an additional 20 minutes. (Do not use an aluminum pan when cooking greens. Natural acids in the greens may pit the aluminum pans.)

To freeze: Wash young tender green leaves thoroughly and cut off woody stems. Greens must be blanched before freezing, so blanch collards in water 3 minutes and all other greens 2 minutes. Cool, drain, and package, leaving 1/2-inch headspace. Seal, label, and freeze. Greens store well for up to one year. Blanching and freezing instructions are outlined in the UK Cooperative Extension publication *Freezing Vegetables* (FCS3-335). This publication is available on the Web at <www.ca.uky.edu/agc/pubs/hepubs.htm> or from your local Extension office.

Greens with Basil Vinaigrette

Salad:

4 cups salad greens, washed and torn
1 apple, quartered, cored, and sliced
1/2 cup fresh mushrooms, sliced

Dressing:

1/4 cup unsweetened pineapple juice
1 tablespoon white wine vinegar
1 tablespoon vegetable oil
1/2 teaspoon fresh basil, snipped
Salt and pepper to taste

Toss salad greens, apple slices, and mushrooms in a large salad bowl. Combine dressing ingredients. Cover and shake well. Drizzle dressing over salad and toss to mix. Yield: 4 servings. *Nutritional Analysis: 70 calories, 1 g protein, 13 g carbohydrate, 3 g fiber, 3 g fat, 200 mg sodium.*

Kale and Potato Gratin

1 bunch (1 lb) kale, washed and trimmed
1 1/4 lb all-purpose potatoes, peeled and sliced
2 small onions, chopped
1 tablespoon margarine or butter, cut into pieces
1/2 teaspoon fresh tarragon, minced
1/4 teaspoon salt
1/8 teaspoon pepper
1 1/2 cups low-fat milk

Steam kale about 10 minutes. Drain and cool. Press out excess water and chop coarsely. In a greased, 2-quart gratin dish, alternate layers of potatoes, onions, and kale, beginning and ending with potatoes. Combine remaining ingredients and pour over potato mixture. Bake in a 350°F oven until potatoes are tender (about 30 to 45 minutes). Yield: 6 servings. *Nutritional Analysis: 170 calories, 7 g protein, 30 g carbohydrate, 3 g fiber, 4 g fat, 5 mg cholesterol, 190 g sodium.*

For additional in-season recipes, check the home page of Family and Consumer Sciences, University of Kentucky College of Agriculture, at <www.ca.uky.edu/agcollege/fcs>.

References

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