

GROWING LEEKS

A popular and versatile autumn and winter vegetable, leeks are members of the Alliaceae (onion) family but are much easier to grow successfully than onions.



Site and soil

Leeks prefer an open, sunny site but will tolerate shade for part of the day. They require a moderately rich, fertile, free draining soil. The addition of compost prior to planting will benefit the crop by improving soil structure and drainage. Fertilise with Talborne Organics 6:3:4 or 3:1:5. Leeks prefer a slightly alkaline soil so a light dressing of lime may be required if the pH is below 6.5.

Planting

Leeks require a long growing season of at least six months to reach a good size, although they can be eaten at any stage. Seedlings transplanted in early spring will be ready to harvest from late summer and those planted in late spring will provide the main winter crop.

Leeks can be grown from seed or bought as seedlings and transplanted. If growing from seed it is best to plant the seed in punnets or a seed bed,

as the seedlings can take 8 to 10 weeks to reach a suitable size for transplanting. Seedlings are ready to transplant when they are about 15 – 20 cm tall.

Leeks are traditionally planted in trenches or in individual 10 – 15 cm deep holes to produce longer white stems. Planting holes are made with a dibber and the seedlings dropped in and gently watered to wash a little soil over the roots. Leeks should be planted at least 15 cm apart to allow them sufficient space to reach full size. Fertilize with Talborne Organics 6:3:4 or 3:1:5.

Cultivating

Leeks need little attention aside from weed control and ensuring regular watering during the growing season.

If you want to produce leeks with very long white stems they will need to be blanched. This requires excluding light from the growing stem to prevent it producing chlorophyll. The original planting depth will determine the length of white stem below the surface. To blanch more of the stem either mound the soil around the stems as they grow, or tie layers of newspaper or thin cardboard around the stems. If using the paper method, avoid overhead irrigation and check regularly for snails and slugs that can take up residence inside the paper collars.

Harvesting

Depending on the variety and planting time it is possible to harvest leeks for many months from early autumn until early spring. Use a fork to lift them as the dense root mass makes it difficult to pull them by hand without breaking the stems.

Leeks are not troubled by frost and will remain in good condition in the ground over winter, but will go to seed as soon as the weather warms in Spring. They are best used fresh from the ground but will keep for several days if refrigerated.

Problems

Leeks are rarely troubled by pests or diseases. Good crop hygiene and regular crop rotation should minimise problems.



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Leek Pests Identification

Leeks can be affected by fungal diseases such as white rot and downy mildew. Consult our disease guides below to help diagnose common leek diseases.



Allium White Rot | *Sclerotium cepivorum*
Where Found: Worldwide

Host Plants:

On Crops: Bulb onions, garlic, shallots, leeks, chives, and ornamental varieties of Allium

Description:

The foliage yellows and wilts. This may coincide with the plants being nearly ready to harvest, so the disease can go unnoticed until the crop is harvested. When pulled, the plant will lift free from the soil easily. On inspection of the area (where the roots sprout from) a fluffy white mold can be found, often peppered with tiny black dots like poppy seeds. The dots are 'sclerotia', which will drop off in the soil and wait until conditions are right for them to germinate and spread the disease to the next onion family crop and they may remain viable in the soil for 7-20 years.

Preventing Problems:

Rotate onions to a fresh site each year to prevent disease build-up. Only buy certified disease-free sets and seedlings and inspect all plants carefully before planting, or grow only from seed.

Managing Outbreaks:

Gather and burn onion debris. Do not compost it. Set aside bulbs from affected plants for short-term consumption, as they will rot in storage. Avoid growing onions in the same area again for at least 8 years.



Onion Downy Mildew | *Peronospora destructor*
Where Found: Worldwide, in humid temperate climates

Host Plants:

On Crops: Bulb onions, leeks, chives, garlic and shallots

Description:

The tips of onion leaves shrivel and fall over. Pale green to yellowish oval spots form further down the leaf. Early in the morning, the spots may appear purplish as the fungus matures, or as the colonies are invaded by other fungi. Constant dampness from rainy weather, heavy fog, or crowded plants is needed to trigger an outbreak of onion downy mildew. Warm, dry weather often curtails this disease.

Preventing Problems:

Choose a sunny, well-drained site for onions. Control weeds that threaten to crowd the plants. Rotate onions to a fresh site to prevent disease buildup. Water early enough in the day so that onion foliage is dry by afternoon. Compost onion debris so that the fungus cannot overwinter in onion tissues buried in the soil.

Managing Outbreaks:

Remove affected leaves, and weed the bed to admit more sun to the planting. Set aside bulbs from affected plants for short-term consumption, because they tend to rot in storage.

RECIPE: Buttered leeks

Serves 8 / Ready in 25-35 minutes

A Scottish favourite, this is one of the best ways to cook leeks – slowly and gently in their own juice.



Ingredients:

1.8kg leek, trimmed / 50g butter, plus extra for serving
thyme leaves for garnish

The day before you want to serve this dish, cut the leeks from top to root and wash thoroughly under cold running water. Thinly slice them on the diagonal and put into plastic bags and chill until ready to cook.

To serve, put a large pan over a medium heat, add the butter and let it melt over the base of the pan. Add the leeks and plenty of seasoning and stir to coat in the butter. Turn the heat down to low, cover the pan and cook the leeks gently for about 15 minutes, stirring half way through until they are tender. Serve with extra butter and a sprinkling of thyme leaves.