



## Micro-greens for Macro-flavors

Fri, 04/16/2010 - 10:25 -- Barbara Damrosch

I call them serendipity salads. A happy byproduct of error. When a row of greens is sown too thickly, the spacing must be corrected, and the result is a basketful of thinnings: tiny, tender and delicious.

Pulled at two or three inches, they're an instant baby-leaf salad harvest. Pulled even smaller, and they're microgreens: little bits of greenery for which chefs pay outrageous sums to garnish plates. At either size, all you need to do is toss them into a sink filled with water, swish them, drain the water, then spin or blot them dry.

Spring is the best time for a thinnings salad, when many crops have been direct-sown. A row of lettuce here, a row of arugula there, and you wind up with a tasty dish. Beets and Swiss chard are the most likely to need thinning, because they grow from small capsules with several seeds in them, separable only after they've sprouted.

Spinach usually needs thinning as well, to a hand's width apart, leaving plenty of small treasures in between to pluck for lunch. Some of the best thinnings are ones you wouldn't think to eat in a salad. Radish leaves, though fine for cooking later on, are tender and mild when small. The same goes for brassicas such as cabbage, collards and kale. Fennel thinnings, which are wispy, flavorful fronds, also are great in salads.

The tips of pea vines have gained popularity in recent years as a salad ingredient, and the nicest ones might be waiting for you in a row you planted extra-close, as insurance against poor germination. Out they come, soon to glisten with vinaigrette.

Since a salad is incomplete without fresh herbs, head for the dill patch next, the one composed of volunteers from last year, thick as a lawn. Give them a spotty haircut with a pair of scissors, allowing the strongest to remain. Do that whenever you want dill, until all the plants are reasonably spaced. Perform the same service for chervil and anise hyssop.

Certain thinnings are best when cooked, such as little turnip greens, which need only a quick braise with butter. And some crops can be left for a second, planned thinning. I'll sometimes let crowded beets develop into small cooking greens before I finish thinning them.

Right now we're eating magnificent scallions from a bed of onions planted in September. The rest of the row will turn into big, sweet onions, but meanwhile we have these timely extras. You can do that with spring-planted onion sets, too. Plant them two inches apart, then thin every other one at the small-bulbed "spring onion" stage. Do the same thing with white baby turnips, harvesting every other plant when the tender roots are dime- or nickel-size.

Then in fall, after you've sown a whole new cool-weather garden, you can enjoy tasty thinnings all over again

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