



Great Spinach (and its Evil Twin)

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One of the most famous cartoons ever to run in the *New Yorker* magazine shows a small girl being told by her mother that the food on her plate is broccoli. "[I say it's spinach, and I say the hell with it](#) [1]," replies the girl. Irving Berlin turned it into a song.

Ever the butt of jokes, spinach needed the support of yet another cartoon figure, Popeye, to earn even a small measure of respect. Why? It's full of folate and bursting with fiber. You can cream it, steam it, make a quiche with it -- even a salad. What's the problem?

Here it is. There is good spinach, well-grown, and there is its evil twin: bitter, strong-tasting spinach, grown in soil with a poor nitrogen-calcium balance. Good spinach is both mellow and sprightly.

You can tell a lot about a spinach crop just by looking at it. In poor soil with too little nitrogen, it is pale, with poor growth, and quick to go to seed. Look at the shape of its leaves as well: They are pointed rather than round when under stress.

But don't be tempted to overdose it with the almighty N. You'll produce leaves with a blue-green cast and little flavor. Avoid high-nitrogen fertilizers and liquid manures, especially if you are growing it in winter in a cold frame or greenhouse. Alfalfa meal, and a good, mature compost that will release nitrogen more slowly, is a better way to go.

You can almost tell the time of year by the way spinach tastes. Spring spinach has a tender freshness. Summer spinach tastes all right only if you garden in a place with cool summers. Fall spinach is the best of all, sublimely sweet. At our place we leave it in the ground until spring, eating it all winter long. In spring it regrows rampantly when cut, but the sweetness is lost and the flavor coarsens as it prepares to go to seed.

How you present spinach to a diner makes a difference, too. If it is a dark, soggy wad, trailing long stems and looking like something that just washed up on the beach, only the polite will lift their forks. Removing big stems, then chopping the spinach, will produce a tidier mound. Boiling and draining it will remove some bitterness, but better to start with mild leaves in the first place.

Spinach cooks down greatly in volume, giving off a lot of water, so after boiling, simmering or even brief steaming you must press some out of it, losing nutrients as you go. I prefer to saute it just enough to barely wilt it, in a large pan with a little olive oil or butter. The moisture evaporates and doesn't collect in the pan. The leaves stay green.

A word about raw spinach. It's good only when the leaves are very small. Big-leaf spinach salad is excellent for holding a robust dressing such as honey mustard or duckfat-romano, and conveniently doesn't wilt in the bowl. But I say big, raw spinach is tough, and I say the hell with it.

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