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Wild About Arugula

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For an easy to grow plant that is also versatile in the kitchen, it's hard to beat arugula. Even so, I have to admit I am a recent convert to the I Love Arugula fan club. But now that I have fallen in love with it, I am making up for lost time and growing as much of it as I can, and as often as I can.

This pungent green was grown by the ancient Romans and Egyptians, who considered it an aphrodisiac, but it became popular in America only fairly recently. In some parts of the world it is called rocket, or roquette, or rucola. Whatever you choose to call it, Arugula (*Eruca sativa*) is a member of the cabbage family and does best in cool weather. It is hardy enough to overwinter in zone 6 and higher if protected. It survived last winter here in a cold frame and our mostly unheated greenhouse from transplants I set out last October.

Arugula plants can be started either by sowing the seed directly in the garden, or by transplants. Either way, the seed should be sown about 1/4"-1/2" deep. Seedlings will emerge in 5-7 days. Arugula is quick to grow, and should be producing edible leaves in 4-5 weeks. Since plants are small and shallow rooted, arugula is excellent for growing in containers. I plant them close together for containers, about 2 or 3 inches apart, in a good potting soil that has a little compost mixed in. Arugula is not too picky about growing conditions, and any well-drained and slightly acidic (pH 6-7) soil will do.

Overwintered plants will flower and go to seed in spring, as part of their natural life cycle. Flowering time is influenced by longer days and higher temperatures. If you have the room to let a couple of plants grow, it is easy to save the seed and use for later plantings. The seed is ready to collect when the long, skinny seed pods are dry and brittle. Or let the arugula self-sow where it will sprout when conditions are favorable and give you a new crop without any work at all! The leaves get stronger tasting when the plants flower, so the flower buds are a sign it's time to plant some fresh plants. All is not lost though as the flowers themselves are edible too.

In the kitchen, I love the peppery taste of arugula in salads and on pizzas. I also like to make pesto with it, and it is great tossed in pasta dishes at the last moment. For something really out of the ordinary, try it in a Green Smoothie. Different selections of arugula seem to have subtle differences in taste, with some being milder and others stronger. I found a strain that I liked and saved seed from it.

Arugula does have a wild relative, sometimes called Sylvetta (*Diplotaxis tenuifolia*) or Rustic Arugula that has an even more pungent taste than regular arugula. It is also a little hardier, and is supposed to be slower to bolt. I?m growing it in my garden this year to see how it performs and tastes.

With a small amount of effort, we'll have arugula growing here for about 8 to 9 months of the year. The season here is roughly from September through May, or until the heat of summer makes the leaves tough and bitter tasting. Then I give it the summer off, and sow more seeds when the weather gets cooler for fall and winter harvests. The wild form is supposed to take the heat better, so we will see what happens to it this year when the dog days of summer arrive.

If you haven't grown arugula before, you might want to give it a try. Who knows, you might turn out to be wild about arugula too!

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