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Swiss Chard in the Garden

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Summary

Swiss chard is a cool-season vegetable that prefers sunny locations and fertile, well-drained soil. Plant seeds ½-1 inch deep. Thin seedlings or transplant chard 6 inches apart in the row with rows 12 inches apart. Swiss chard tastes best when plants grow rapidly and mature before the heat of summer. Irrigation should be frequent and uniform to ensure good growth. Control insects and diseases throughout the year. Harvest Swiss chard when the leaves reach full size.



Recommended Varieties

Swiss chard comes in a variety of leaf colors. Planting a range of different types makes salads and meals more interesting. There are many good varieties for sale in local gardening outlets and through seed catalogs. Most grow well in Utah. Suitable varieties include Rhubarb, Bright Lights, Lucullus, and Fordhook Giant.

How to Grow

Soil: Swiss chard prefers fertile, well-drained soils rich in organic matter for best growth. Most soils in Utah are well suited for Swiss chard production.

Soil Preparation: Before planting, incorporate 2-4 inches of well-composted organic matter or apply 4-6 cups of all-purpose fertilizer (16-16-8 or 10-10-10) per 100 square feet. Work this into the top 6 inches of soil.

Plants: Swiss chard can be grown from seed or transplants. Swiss chard can be sown after soils reach 40°F. Seeds germinate best at 55-75°F and require 7-14 days to emerge. Temperatures above 80°F reduce seed germination. Seeds should be planted ½-1 inch deep. Thin stands when plants have 3-4 true leaves. Plants removed at thinning can be used as transplants in adjacent areas if some roots are maintained or they can also be eaten. Transplants are used to provide an earlier harvest. Transplants should have 4-6 mature leaves and a well-developed root system before planting out. Generally 5-6 weeks are required to grow transplants to this size.

Planting and Spacing: Seeded or transplanted Swiss chard should be spaced 6 inches between plants in the row with rows 12 inches apart. Dense plantings will reduce weed pressure. Swiss chard grows best when temperatures do not exceed 75°F. Temperatures down to 32°F do not seriously damage young plants. Transplants should be planted near the last frost-free date for the growing area. Seeded Swiss chard may be planted 3-4 weeks earlier. High summer temperatures reduce growth, decrease quality, and may cause bitter or off-flavors to develop. For fall Swiss chard, select early maturing cultivars and plant 50-75 days before the anticipated maturity date. The maturity date should be about 2-3 weeks before the first fall frost. Plants can be left in the garden after light frosts.

Water: Water chard regularly supplying 1-2 inches per week. Water requirements depend on soil type and temperatures. Mulch around the plant also helps conserve soil moisture and reduce weed growth. Moisture fluctuations will cause leaves to become tough, slow leaf development and contribute to off-flavors.

Fertilization: Apply ½ cup per 10 foot of row of a nitrogen-based fertilizer (21-0-0 or 34-0-0) 4 weeks after transplanting or thinning to encourage rapid plant growth. Place the fertilizer to the side of the plants and irrigate it into the soil.

Mulches and Row Covers: Fabric covers are used to protect seedlings and transplants from frost. Apply organic mulches such as grass clippings, straw, and newspapers to cool the soil when temperatures increase, reduce water stress, and help control weeds.

Problems

Weeds: Swiss chard does not compete well with weeds. Weed control is particularly important during establishment. Closely spaced plants will help control weeds. Cultivate shallowly and avoid root pruning to ensure uninterrupted growth.

Insects and Diseases: Most Swiss chard is fast growing and is not susceptible to many disease problems. Rotating locations from year to year helps control most diseases.

Pest	Identification	Control
Aphids	Green or black soft-bodied insects that feed on underside of leaves. Leaves become crinkled and curled.	Use insecticidal soaps, appropriate insecticides, or strong water stream to dislodge insects.
Slugs	Soft-bodied or shelled mollusks that chew holes in leaves.	Control with appropriate pesticides or traps. Avoid moist conditions that favor these pests.
Flea Beetles	Small black beetles that feed on seedlings. Adults chew tiny holes in cotyledons and leaves. Beetles can reduce plant stands or may kill seedlings.	Control beetles with appropriate insecticides at seeding or after seedlings have emerged from the soil.

Harvest and Storage

Swiss chard can be harvested when the leaves reach full size or anytime after they form. Older leaves are often stripped off the plants first allowing the young leaves to continue to grow. Provided the growing point is not damaged, all leaves can be cut off to within 2 inches of the soil. Swiss chard can be stored for 1-2 weeks if refrigerated.

Productivity

A 10-foot row of Swiss chard will produce 8-12 pounds.

Nutrition

Swiss chard has no fat, is low in calories and cholesterol, and is a good source of fiber, vitamins A, C, calcium, iron, and folate.

Frequently Asked Questions

Which parts of Swiss chard are edible? The leaves are the main edible part. Stems can also be eaten. Chard may be eaten raw or cooked.

When is the best time to plant Swiss chard? Swiss chard should be planted 2-3 weeks before the anticipated last frost in the spring. Plant 3-4 weeks before the anticipated first frost in the fall for an autumn crop.

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