

ARUGULA

Master Gardener Ellen Scarr

Arugula (*Eruca sativa*) is a cool season green which has been grown since Roman times (possibly as an aphrodisiac!). Used extensively in Italian cooking, arugula (also known as rocket) has gained immense popularity here in the United States with chefs and home cooks as well.

Growing Arugula

Arugula is very easy to grow, germinating quickly from seed. Fall (September through November) is the perfect time to plant, as arugula prefers cool soil. Sow seeds in late summer or early fall for a fall and winter crop; it can also be planted in the spring for a spring and early summer harvest (arugula will bolt in hot weather). Soil should be kept moist to facilitate germination. Arugula seedlings have shallow roots, so seeds can be interspersed with other fall crops if desired.

Arugula can be grown in full sun in the fall, although if the weather remains warm a shaded spot is preferable. Arugula can also be grown in pots (at least 6" deep), wine barrels or even in indoor containers. Sow seeds 1" apart, 1/4" deep, and then thin to 2-3" apart in rows or, even easier, just broadcast seed over the soil. Seedlings will appear in 7-14 days. For a continuous supply of delicious greens, sow seeds every two weeks.

Arugula grows best with regular watering; it is rarely bothered by pests or diseases. And arugula tolerates cold weather, even withstanding frost when protected with a row cover.

Varieties

The two general types of arugula are salad and wild. Although both types share the characteristic peppery, nutty taste, salad arugula is generally milder, while wild arugula is spicier and has a longer shelf life. Seeds are widely available in nurseries and through seed catalogues. A number of different varieties exist, many of which will have "Italian" in the name. Salad types include "Roquette" and "Olive Leaf," while "Selvatica" is a wild type. A few varieties are also heat tolerant, such as "Astro," which makes them ideal for planting in the late spring and early summer.

Harvest

Your arugula will be ready in a little as 3-4 weeks. You can begin to harvest arugula when the seedlings are 3" tall; the smaller leaves have a milder flavor than larger ones. You can cut the leaves and new ones will sprout for future harvesting. The flowers are also edible, with a mild taste similar to that of the leaves.

Uses

Arugula is delicious as a simple salad, dressed with olive oil and some shavings of Parmigiana cheese, or as an addition to a salad of mixed lettuces. It can be stirred into pasta or sauces, added to chicken or fish just before serving, or used as a fresh topping for pizza. If you enjoy pesto made with basil, try substituting arugula for the basil for a different, flavorful variation.

As the weather (finally) cools, it's the perfect time to plant some arugula. You'll enjoy it all through the fall and winter!