



*“Weed your garden carefully,
or you might prune out
a worthy candidate for dinner.”*

Southern Greens

TURN OVER A NEW LEAF

By Carol Penn-Romine

As a child attempting to eat cooked spinach, I wished I could consume it exactly the way Popeye did, in a stream that flowed from the can and arced gracefully through the air and down my throat, without having to touch my tongue. For of all the overcooked vegetables that dogged my childhood, greens were the worst offenders. Tortured to a dull, darkish, gamy pulp, they looked, tasted and felt like pure evil. The only thing that helped them approach palatability was a sprinkling of vinegar from the ubiquitous tiny bottle with a nail hole poked in the lid and a green hot pepper floating inside.

It's time for Southerners to turn over a new leaf, and winter is the perfect time to do so and reexamine our relationship with greens.

Let's face it, greens need a good press agent, for they're not the sexiest veggies around. They look great in the garden, but once you've wilted them, there's not much remaining in the way of eye-appeal. So it's best to focus on all they have going for them. They're inexpensive, easy to grow and prepare, highly nutritious, versatile and willing to thrive when the rest of your garden is taking its winter siesta.

I realize it's every Southerner's God-given right to cook vegetables in an iron skillet with bacon drippings until you can't tell a bean from a carrot, but please, don't be mean to the greens! Personally, my favorite cooking fat and flavoring agent is that beloved coffee can of bacon drippings. But greens are remarkably versatile and will play nicely with the seasonings and flavors of cuisines from around the world, from the Americas to Europe to Africa to Asia. We just need to educate ourselves on how to treat them.

Undoubtedly, most greens are not for the faint-of-palate. They're earthy and prone to being bitter, which is a problem for many Westerners and most likely the reason they tend to be overcooked. Asian cooks embrace bitter as one of the major tastes, along with sweet, salty, sour, spicy and umami. However, bitter won't hurt you, and in fact, it's a taste that does seem to be catching on. Witness the rising popularity of such salad greens as Belgian endive, radicchio, frisée and escarole.

Just as a crisp, white wine cuts the unctuousness of fish, the astringent quality of greens makes them a good match for rich foods and creamy sauces. So consider this bonus next time you plan your menu.

The smallest leaves of most greens can go straight into the salad bowl with no more than a good bath. Larger leaves tend to be tough and bitter and require about ten minutes of blanching before you proceed with your recipe. Many cooks remove the tough central vein, but if you chop the leaves or roll them like a green cigar and slice them into ribbons—called a chiffonade—you can easily cook away the toughness and save yourself some time.

Crave a smoother mouth feel in your greens? Then mix in some chopped leeks when you cook them. Leeks make everything more velvety and rich and add extra nutritional value.

If you're fresh out of ideas—or groceries—try making “Cooked Water.” This basic European peasant soup has as many varieties as there are cooks. Essentially you toss into the pot whatever you have on hand. For the ancient Greeks, fistfuls of greens of all types went into the pot, along with water and garlic. So weed your garden carefully, or you might prune out a worthy candidate for dinner. And be sure to drink the “pot likker” that remains after cooking (or incorporate it into the soup), for that's where most of the nutrients have gone.

Carol Penn-Romine grew up on a farm in northwest Tennessee and lived in Memphis for 15 years before moving to Los Angeles, where she is a chef, writer and culinary tour guide. You can visit her company, Hungry Passport Culinary Adventures at www.hungrypassport.com.

The Dirty (or at least lightly soiled) Dozen

By Carol Penn-Romine

Following are twelve winter greens that grow in the Memphis area—even through the winter. All of them are great either solo or in combination. Be sure to wash them carefully and rinse them several times so you don’t experience any of those spine-seizing moments when you chomp down on a piece of grit. Then incorporate them into soups, quiches, casseroles, side dishes and even main dishes.



Swiss chard: This cousin of the beet green comes in Christmasy green and red-veined varieties. It’s a durable leaf that is easy to stuff—just blanch it in salted water for a couple of minutes, then continue with any stuffed-leaf recipe, such as cabbage rolls or dolmades.



Collard greens: This transplant from Africa has a particularly bitter, cabbagey taste. Give collards a good 20 minutes of pre-cooking, so they’ll tone down before you continue with your recipe. If collard greens are too strong for your liking, mix them with milder leaves, such as spinach and kale.



Mustard: This particularly tangy, peppery green goes especially well with rich foods and meats. It’s best to cook mustard in combination with other greens to mitigate some of its attitude. Toss tiny mustard leaves into a salad to give it zing.



Spinach: A mainstay of most everyone’s garden, spinach is rich in protein as well as all the other usual green vitamins and minerals. Spinach is notorious for harboring grit in its folds, so if you dodge spinach because of this, opt for the smooth-leaf varieties that are easier to clean.



Turnip greens: This fibrous green tastes like a spicier version of its root vegetable and can be seasoned aggressively. Incorporate turnip greens into Indian and Asian recipes, which are always flavorful and loaded with herbs and spices.

Collard photo by Carole Topalian

Dandelion photo by Suzannab Skelton



Sorrel: This lemony leaf is good to toss raw into a mixed salad. Or, you can give its larger leaves a light sauté and use them as a bed for fish. Sorrel’s natural tartness is a great accompaniment to any seafood.

Nettle photo by Mark Helfter



Nettles: Handle these greens with gloves—literally! But don’t be put off by their weaponry. Enjoy their grassy flavor, which pairs well with sorrel. They typically aren’t planted but rather volunteer in your yard or garden. If they’re going to show up uninvited, why not have them stay for dinner? Just don’t touch or eat them until they’ve been fully cooked.



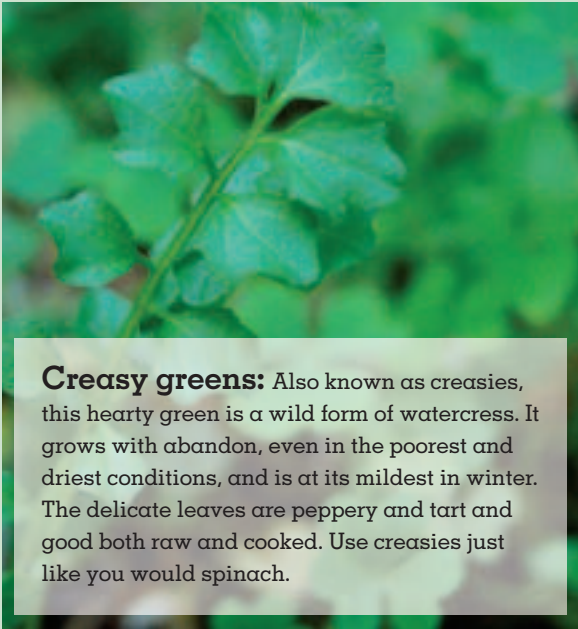
Dandelion greens: While others spy dandelions in their yards and fly into a weed-pulling frenzy, I see them and think, “Hey, free food!” As with most other greens, you can add the smaller leaves to your salad mix. Cook the larger, tougher ones with the other greens. Their moderate flavor helps temper stronger varieties. Use the blossoms for garnish or in salads or batter and deep fry them.



Beet greens: These greens are rather sweet and taste a lot like their root. They are tender and good for quick cooking methods like sautéing, steaming and stir-frying.



Kale: Although kale is a fairly mild-tasting green, the low temperatures of winter further sweeten its flavor. A light braise or a quick simmer is all that’s needed to get the best out of this green.



Creasy greens: Also known as creasies, this hearty green is a wild form of watercress. It grows with abandon, even in the poorest and driest conditions, and is at its mildest in winter. The delicate leaves are peppery and tart and good both raw and cooked. Use creasies just like you would spinach.



Arugula: Winter’s brisk temperatures tame arugula’s peppery bite and give it a sweeter, more delicate flavor. If you like your arugula to bite back, pick it when the ground is dry.

Kale photo by Carole Topalian

Spinach photo by Victor Burnside