

Kale and Collards

Greens, or the edible leaves of certain plants, have been cultivated for thousands of years. There is evidence that kale was eaten over 2,000 years ago in the Middle East. The Greeks and Romans cultivated spinach even before the Christian era. Frontier families in America picked and cooked the new growth of many plants, like lamb's quarters, chickweed, sorrel, dandelion, and fiddleheads (the coiled spirals of baby ferns.) The appearance of "greens" not only announced the arrival of spring but also offered a fresh color and flavor break from their bleak winter diet.

While years ago people would "harvest" these greens as they grew wild, today a large number of widely differing species of plants are grown for use as "cooking greens," including spinach, mustard, chard, cress, and turnip.

Let's focus on two readily available but perhaps not widely eaten greens--collards and kale. These vegetables are members of the same family as broccoli, cauliflower, and cabbage. All varieties of collards appear rather similar with wide, dark green leaves that grow in rosette fashion around an upright, stocky main stem. The long-stemmed leaves resemble cabbage leaves, with thick central veins, but are oval in shape instead of round. Kale usually has dark, dusty-looking green, curly leaves but some varieties have plain leaves or purplish-red or light green flecked with creamy white color.

You may have noticed kale as a garnish on your restaurant plate or around the salad bar. Some varieties have a decorative use in gardens. It is remarkably versatile and can be eaten raw but is best lightly cooked or added to soup or stew. Kale, often paired with potatoes, has a mild, somewhat spicy flavor similar to that of cabbage.

Edible greens in general are rich sources of certain vitamins and minerals, though the content differs according to the particular variety. Greens are a source of Vitamins A, C, E, and K, as well as adding folate, potassium, iron and fiber to the diet. Kale and collard greens are also fair sources of calcium, though it may not be absorbed as well as calcium from dairy products.

The best time to buy collard greens and kale at the grocery store is between the months of January through April because they taste the best after they experience a winter frost. However, they are widely available fresh throughout most of the year. Don't forget to look in the frozen vegetable section for an additional supply of greens. Many greens are also available in the canned food aisle but check the label carefully for sodium or fat which may have been added, especially to "home style" types.

When shopping for fresh greens, look for firm, crisp leaves with deep green color, free of any brown or yellow spots. Buy only what you can use, or freeze, in a few days. Do not wash the greens until you are ready to use them. The best way to store these leaves is in damp paper towels inside a plastic bag. For best nutritional value, use within 1 to 2 days of purchase.

To wash greens, dip them in salted water (1 to 2 teaspoons salt per gallon of water) and lift them from water. Rinse well and shake off excess water. Tough stems, veins and discolored leaves should be removed before cooking.

Greens can be steamed in a covered pot with only the water clinging to leaves. Keep the heat low to avoid scorching. A scant 1/4 cup water can be added if necessary. Cook the greens only until they are wilted for the best nutritional value. Traditionally they were cooked with a ham hock, fat back, or other pork for flavoring but healthier ways to add flavor are with lean ham, smoked turkey, onions or herbs. Discover your favorite way to enjoy these nutritious greens.

Savory Kale

2 pounds fresh kale

2 teaspoons chopped onion

1/2 teaspoon sugar

1/2 cup water

1/2 teaspoon marjoram

Pepper to taste

1 tablespoon vegetable oil (optional)

Wash kale and cut off tough stems. Place in saucepan with water, onions, marjoram, sugar and pepper. Cover and cook for 10 minutes or until tender. Add oil, mix well and serve. Yield: 6 servings

Pasta with Greens and Feta

8 (packed) cups greens, rinsed and chopped
1 package (1 pound) penne, fusilli, shells, or similar small pasta
1/2 pound feta cheese, crumbled
Pepper to taste
3 Tablespoons olive oil
4 cups onion, chopped

Cook the pasta according to package directions, until tender; drain and set aside. Heat the oil in a deep skillet or pot. Add the onion and sauté for about 10 minutes over medium heat, stirring occasionally. Add the greens and stir until the greens begin to wilt. Cover and cook 10 to 15 minutes over medium-low heat. Add the crumbled feta cheese to the skillet (keep the heat on low as you add the cheese). Add the cooked pasta to the skillet. Mix thoroughly. Heat through on low heat. Add pepper to taste. As a variation, add chopped tomatoes with the cooked pasta. Yield: 6 servings

Nutrition Facts per serving: 500 calories; 16g total fat; 7g saturated fat; 35mg cholesterol; 510mg sodium; 69g total carbohydrate; 5g dietary fiber. (Percent Daily Values based on a 2,000 calorie diet - Vitamin A 40%, Vitamin C 40%, Calcium 25%, Iron 25%)

Seasoned Collard Greens

2 quarts water	1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
2 pounds collard greens	6 ounces turkey ham cut into 1/2 inch cubes (about one cup)
1 large onion, chopped fine	
1/2 teaspoon red pepper flakes	

Wash greens thoroughly, discarding stems and yellow leaves. Tear into small pieces. Combine the first five ingredients in a large pot; bring to a boil. Reduce heat, cover and simmer for 30 minutes. Add turkey ham and simmer another 30 minutes. Serves 4.

Kale, Tomato, and Bean Casserole

3 tablespoons olive oil	1/4 teaspoon pepper
3 cloves garlic, chopped	1 (15-ounce) can cannellini (white) beans, rinsed and drained
1 large bunch (about 16 cups or 2 pounds) shredded kale leaves, no stems	1/2 cup dried bread crumbs
3 cups tomatoes, chopped—or 1 (28-ounce) can crushed tomatoes	1/2 cup Parmesan cheese, grated
1 teaspoon paprika	2 tablespoons fresh parsley, chopped

Preheat the oven to 400° F. Lightly oil a shallow 9- by 13-inch casserole dish. Heat 2 tablespoons of the oil in a large skillet. Sauté half the garlic for 1 minute over medium heat. Add the kale and sauté until it is wilted (about 5 minutes), stirring often. Add the tomatoes, paprika, and pepper and sauté for 5 minutes. Add the beans. Spoon the mixture into the casserole dish.

In a small bowl, combine the remaining 1 tablespoon oil and garlic with the bread crumbs, cheese, and parsley. Sprinkle evenly on top of the vegetables and bake until well browned and bubbling, 25 to 30 minutes.

Nutrition Facts per serving: 250 calories; 8g total fat; 2g saturated fat; 5mg cholesterol; 400mg sodium; 31g total carbohydrate; 9g dietary fiber. (Percent Daily Values based on a 2,000 calorie diet - Vitamin A 200%, Vitamin C 200%, Calcium 30%, Iron 20%)

Sausage Kale Soup

3/4 cup chopped onion	1/4 teaspoon salt
2 garlic cloves, minced	1/4 teaspoon pepper
1 tablespoon olive oil	1 pound fresh kale, trimmed and chopped
4 cups reduced-sodium chicken broth	1 can (15 ounces) white kidney or cannelloni
2 medium potatoes, peeled and cubed	beans, rinsed and drained
1/2 pound reduced-fat fully cooked Polish sausage or turkey kielbasa, sliced	

In a large saucepan or Dutch oven, sauté onion and garlic in oil until tender. Add the broth, potatoes, salt and pepper. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat; cover and simmer for 10-15 minutes or until potatoes are tender. Using a potato masher, mash potatoes slightly. Add the kale, beans and sausage; cook over medium-low heat until kale is tender. Yield: 6 servings

Recipes are from University of Arkansas, Cooperative Extension and University of Vermont, Extension.

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