Leafy greens include lettuce, spinach, Swiss chard, kale and arugula. They are easy to grow and prepare, and provide a wide variety of nutrients.

Growing

Leafy greens are easy to grow for beginning gardeners. These crops can grow in light shade to full sun in well-drained soil rich in organic matter. Lettuce is planted as a cool-season crop in early spring or late summer, and it will “bolt” (go to seed) in the summer heat.

Although some leafy greens (such as kale and Swiss chard) take significant space, some leafy greens can be grown in small areas and even containers. Lettuce can be harvested at any time that leaves are present; however, small baby leaves are more tender. You also can plant more than one crop of greens during the growing season.

For more information about growing and using leafy greens, see the NDSU Extension Service publication “From Garden to Table: Leafy Greens!” (H1754).

Preparation

To clean leafy greens, rinse them in cool running water. Sometimes soil can be difficult to remove, so place the leafy greens in a bowl of cool water and allow them to sit for a couple of minutes to loosen the soil. Rinse and remove excess moisture by blotting the lettuce with a clean paper towel or by placing the greens in a salad spinner.

Preservation

Green leafy vegetables, such as spinach, can be frozen; however, their structures are altered during the freezing process and they should not be used in salads. Blanch greens (such as spinach) in boiling water for two minutes, then cool, drain and package, leaving ½-inch of head space. Be sure to label the package with the contents and date. Previously frozen green leafy vegetables may be used in soup, casseroles, stir-fries and smoothies. Frozen leafy green vegetables are best if used within six months of freezing.

Nutrition

Dark green leafy vegetables provide a variety of nutrients and fiber. For example, 1 cup of raw spinach has 7 calories, 0 grams (g) fat, 1 g protein, 1 g carbohydrate, 1 g fiber and 24 milligrams sodium. Green leafy vegetables are rich in vitamins A (from the carotenoid natural pigments), C, K and the B vitamin folate. Leafy greens also contain calcium and iron.
Loose-leaf Green Lettuce Salad for One

2 tsp. mild-flavored vegetable oil, such as canola oil
1 tsp. apple cider vinegar
½ tsp. sugar
2 c. loose-leaf lettuce, rinsed thoroughly and drained
Optional add-ins: sliced radishes, finely sliced apples, mandarin oranges, cranberries, chopped pecans

Whisk oil, vinegar and sugar together in a small bowl. Toss with the greens.

Makes one serving. Each serving has 110 calories, 9 g fat, 1 g protein, 6 g carbohydrate, 1 g fiber and 10 mg sodium.

Spinach Salad

With Poppy Seed Dressing

8 c. bite-sized pieces of fresh spinach
½ c. julienne strips of jicama or carrot sticks
½ c. sliced fresh radishes
1 medium mango or 3 medium fresh oranges, peeled, seeded and cut up
Optional: ½ hard-cooked egg, chopped, on each serving
Optional: strawberries as garnish

Dressing

2 Tbsp. honey
2 Tbsp. white vinegar
1 Tbsp. yellow mustard
2 Tbsp. finely diced onions
2 tsp. poppy seeds
¼ tsp. salt
½ c. canola oil

In tightly covered container, shake all dressing ingredients. In a large bowl, toss dressing and remaining ingredients. Garnish with egg and/or strawberries if desired.

Makes eight servings. With carrot and ½ egg per serving, each serving has 330 calories, 25 g fat, 9 g protein, 22 g carbohydrate, 3 g fiber and 320 mg sodium.