

Reviewed June 2010

# Leeks in the Garden

*Dan Drost*, Vegetable Specialist

## Summary

Leek is a hardy cool-season biennial that prefers full sun and fertile, well-drained soils. Incorporate plenty of organic matter and a complete fertilizer into the area before planting. Plant seeds  $\frac{1}{4}$ - $\frac{1}{2}$  inch deep, 3-4 inches apart in the row, and 8-16 inches between rows. Sidedress leeks with nitrogen in May and June to ensure good growth and high yields. Leeks require regular watering, so maintain soils near field capacity. Water stress will reduce yields and plant size. Organic mulches help conserve water, supply extra nutrients and reduce weeding. Control weeds, insects and diseases throughout the year. Leeks may be harvested and used when larger than one inch in diameter. In more mild areas of Utah, leeks can be stored in the garden by hilling up the soil around the plants and covering them with mulch. In very cold areas, harvest the plants and store in cold (32-40F), humid conditions to maintain best quality. Excellent varieties include Large American Flag and King Richard.



## Recommended Varieties

Excellent varieties include Large American Flag and King Richard. Check with local garden centers or seed catalogs for other varieties that perform well in your area.

## How to Grow

**Soils:** Leeks will grow in all soil types provided they are rich, well drained, moist, and fertile. **Soil Preparation:** Before planting, incorporate 4-6 inches of well-composted organic matter and 1-2 lb of all-purpose fertilizer (16-16-8) per 100 square feet. Work compost and fertilizer into the soil to a depth of 6-8 inches.

**Plants:** For earlier production, use transplants for planting out in early April. Seeds may be started indoors or in a greenhouse. Transplants need 6-8 weeks of growth before planting in the garden.

**Planting and Spacing:** If using seeds plant seeds  $\frac{1}{4}$ - $\frac{1}{2}$  inch deep. After emergence, seeds should be thinned to 4-6 inches apart in rows 8-16 inches apart. Transplants should be planted at the same spacing as seeds. Plant seeds in late March or transplants in April. When transplanting, place 10-12 inch tall plants in a 6-inch deep dibble hole and water them into place. During the growing season, hill around the plants with soil 2-3 times with 2-3 inches of banked up soil. Hilling encourages taller growth thus producing a larger blanched edible stem. Transplanting with the dibble method partially eliminates the need for multiple hilling.

**Water:** Leeks require regular watering throughout growth for best production. Soils need to be maintained near field capacity. Moisten the soil thoroughly to a depth of 18 inches every 7 days. Water needs are critical since rooting depth in leeks is shallow. Drought stress during growth will decrease yield.

**Fertilization:** In addition to the fertilizer used at planting, leeks needs additional nitrogen fertilizer to produce optimum yields. Sidedress leeks with nitrogen at  $\frac{1}{2}$  lb (21-0-0) per 100 square feet in late May and June.

## Problems

**Weeds:** Control weeds through regular cultivation but avoid root damage that slows plant growth by damaging shallow roots. Weed control is particularly important during the first 2 months of growth when

plants are growing slowly and compete poorly. Mulching with compost, grass clippings or leaves will conserve water and smother weeds.

### Insects and Diseases:

Insect	Identification	Control
Thrips	Tiny, slender insects that feed on leaves. Leaves turn silver or gray, may twist and die. Thrips hide near where the leaf and bulb meet.	Spray with registered chemicals
Onion Maggot	White worm that feeds on seedlings, roots or bulbs.	Use crop rotation, avoid excessive amounts of organic matter, and apply appropriate insecticide at planting if maggots have been a problem in the past..
Wireworm	Larvae of chick beetle. Dark brown to yellowish, jointed hard-shelled and cylindrical. Feeds on roots, seeds, and underground stems.	Use crop rotation, avoid excessive amounts of organic matter, and apply appropriate insecticide at planting if a problem in the past. Rotenone or wood ashes also provide some control.

## Harvest and Storage

Leek varieties vary in their maturity times. Leeks may be harvested as early as 60 days after seeding but generally require 100-120 days to mature. Leeks are ready to eat when the stalks are 1 inch in diameter. Leeks can be overwintered in the garden in most areas. Hill up the soil around the plants and cover them with a heavy layer of mulch and soil. In very cold areas, store harvested leeks in cold (32-40F), humid conditions (wet sand) to minimize moisture loss.

## Productivity

One leek seed or transplant will yield one sheath 6-8 inches long and 1-2 inches wide. Plant 3-6 feet of row per person per family in order to have sufficient for fresh and storage purposes..

## Nutrition

A 1-cup serving of leeks is low in Sodium, and very low in Saturated Fat and Cholesterol. They are a good source of Dietary Fiber, Vitamin B6, Iron and Magnesium, and a very good source of Vitamin A, Vitamin C and Folate.

## Frequently Asked Questions

**Q. What are leeks used for?** Leeks are used in a variety of delicious dishes including, but not limited to, soups, salads and casseroles.

**Q. Can leeks be frozen as a storage method?** Leeks can be frozen, pickled, canned or dehydrated. When freezing leeks, trim and then blanch for 2 to 3 minutes in boiling water. Cool rapidly, towel dry and place in freezer bags.

Utah State University is committed to providing an environment free from harassment and other forms of illegal discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age (40 and older), disability, and veteran's status. USU's policy also prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in employment and academic related practices and decisions.

Utah State University employees and students cannot, because of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, or veteran's status, refuse to hire; discharge; promote; demote; terminate; discriminate in compensation; or discriminate regarding terms, privileges, or conditions of employment, against any person otherwise qualified. Employees and students also cannot discriminate in the classroom, residence halls, or in on/off campus, USU-sponsored events and activities.

This publication is issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work. Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Noelle E. Cockett, Vice President for Extension and Agriculture, Utah State University. (HG/2004-04pr)