



Urban Harvest

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## Summer Spinach is Worth Trying

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The word spinach is used loosely to refer to green vegetables whose leaves are eaten like common spinach. The leaves are boiled, steamed, or sautéed and contain a lot of nutritious substances. Because the Houston area has a long, humid summer, and because European spinach grows only in cold weather and not very well here, you may benefit from growing one of the many easy-to-grow tropical plants that produce nutritious and tasty cooked leaves. To grow summer spinach you will need to make some effort to get seeds or starter plants, get them started, take care of them, and learn how to eat them. The reward is great however since these plants grow faster than nutgrass.

The main types of summer spinach are: Ong choy or Southeast Asian spinach, calaloo or tampala, chaya, Malabar, and melokhayya. Each of these is a favorite of one or more tropical locales, so if you grow these you will be taking a culinary trip around the tropics.

Southeast Asian spinach is a close relative of the sweet potato, but has better tasting leaves and grows in poorer drainage. It is widely eaten throughout Southeast Asia and southern Asia and in Asian restaurants here, so there are different names for it. In Houston, you find it as ong choy (Cantonese), eng tsai (Chinese), rau muô'ng (Vietnamese), or cangcung (Philippines). The plant is sometimes mistakenly called water spinach, because it is a relative of an Asian weed that spreads in waterways. Southeast Asian spinach, however, has flowers and seeds, and does not grow without soil. It is known as the "upland" spinach.

The easiest way to get plants is to wait until May for the vegetable in Chinese or Vietnamese food markets. Then either root the cuttings in water as you would sweet potatoes or purchase seed at these markets and plant them at least a foot apart. When you have about 2 ft. of vine that you can cut without killing the plant, cut the vine, pick off the leaves, sauté with onions or garlic until tender, then add a little lemon, vinegar, or tomato. Yum.

Calaloo is a Caribbean term for 'leafy vegetable'. But the most common form is called "leaf amaranth." There are types of amaranth that produce grain, and others, such as cockscomb and love-lies-bleeding that produce beautiful flowers. The best tasting Japanese varieties are sold as tampala, Taiwanese as Chinese spinach, and African as quail grass. All leaf amaranths have coleus-like leaves, pretty seed heads, and are best eaten when 30 days old.

Chaya is also known as "Mayan tree spinach" because it comes from Guatemala and southern Mexico. It is a perennial unless the winters go below 25°. Plant any stem. The leaves are higher in

protein than nearly anything you can grow. Leaves must be boiled at least four minutes. Some gardeners enjoy it as a nutritious soup stock; simmer 30 minutes.

Malabar or running spinach is easily the best-known summer spinach in our area, and plants are often found at area garden stores. Malabar is on India's southwest coast. The spinach has beautiful glossy leaves and some varieties have red stems, so it can be very ornamental. I knew someone who sold it as spinach to a supermarket, and if young leaves are eaten raw, it tastes like and looks a bit like ordinary spinach. If you cook it, make sure you don't cook longer than 7 minutes, or you will have a mess.

Melokhayya is the most popular vegetable in Egypt. It is called mazocchi in Italian. The plant is high in calcium, vitamins, and potassium and the leaves are used in soups, greens medleys, and stews.

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