

Speaking of Leeks
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Cultural Requirements

Leeks like other alliums enjoy relatively high pH of 7-7.5 for vigorous growth in their early stages and an inch of water per week. The land for leeks should be "under the hoe" for at least three prior seasons and be void of perennial and grassy weeds. A friable soil with good moisture holding capacity accommodates hilling for blanching prior to harvest as well as survival of transplants which are extremely tender. If the season or the land require irrigation at transplanting it is better to irrigate prior to transplanting rather than after. Watering in leek transplants requires small droplets if overhead irrigation is used. Leeks thrive in cool temperatures of spring and fall. They can be started outdoors in flats and held in the field till the ground freezes. Warmth and humidity promotes purple blotch which is probably the most economically damaging fungus since it festers at the crown where the layers of leaves join and penetrates many leaf layers.

Allure of Leeks

Leeks are prized by cooks for their depth of onion flavor without the heat of other onions, they are not sweet but their leafy tops add very strong flavor to soups, stews and salads. The milder blanched stalks will not color broths and are considered the finest onion for soups. Potatoes and leeks are considered one of the finest culinary combinations and their harvests are timed together as well. Potato Leek Soup, Cockaleekie, Vichyssoise, Colcannon etc. are renowned traditional dishes that rely on leeks. Chicken stock is the preferred broth, though fish stews often require leeks. Parsley, chive and thyme are the herbs which compliment leek flavor and nutmeg and white pepper are the preferred spices. They are a cold weather vegetable essential to haute cuisine as well as common country cooking. Leeks with long white shafts and leafy green tops make a colorful addition to accent a farmstand. The strong scent of fresh leeks penetrates a farmers' market.

Growing Transplants

Unless they are being grown for plant sales, the leeks for planting into the field can be started outdoors in any rich soil medium and they are not bothered by frost. Spun-bonded row covers and fertilizer can accelerate growth when necessary. However, depending on the variety there is no rush to get them in the field since they do not tolerate weeds in early growth stages and crops planted in mid-June will size by October. For grower economy and market consideration, transplants should be heavily rouged when prepared for planting. Large leeks sell! Spindly transplants make spindly leeks that need to be bunched for sale. Likewise careful seeding into flats so there is no crowding will produce better seedlings. When they are 1/8" thick they are ready for the field. Tops should be trimmed to minimize water loss and drooping which hinders hoeing, cultivating and irrigating. Root trimming which should be kept to a minimum, may be needed as well, depending on the transplanter.

Planting and Spacing

Traditionally long leeks with blanched stalks have been marketed, which requires space and soil for hilling. For this type of leek 36" rows with 6" between transplants works fine. If weed control and land allow, wider row spacing is easier for large equipment. If a leafy leek is grown with short stalks a bedding system can be used but the grower should have fine cultivating equipment for tight spacing. Leeks, like onions, will create no crop canopy to compete with summer annual weeds. The hilling of leeks is used as vigorous cultivation and weed control during their long season. Transplants should be set 1"-2" deep depending on their size and well watered. Afternoon planting on hot days will minimize drooping and facilitate hoeing.

Varieties

Leeks that are long sell best since many don't use the leafy top, only the stalk. Among these King Richard is one of the most reliable. It is susceptible to purple blotch. Varieties with deep blue-green leaves are generally less susceptible and hardier (Tadorna, Carina). Short season leeks such as Poncho have very brittle leaves and are difficult to harvest without leaf loss and breakage. As a grower and a cook I prefer a medium length leek with lots of deeply colored leaf.

Harvest and Storage

Leeks can be pulled by hand but some loss will occur from breakage, especially if deeply rooted. A digger facilitates large harvest but lots of dirt works into the crowns. Cleaning and packing is the biggest chore. Leaves should be left as long as possible and washing is best if the tops are kept down so that dirt from the roots is not washed into the crowns. The biggest complaint from customers about leeks "they are so dirty". Roots should be trimmed and rinsed as well. Lots of leaf packs them tightly and makes a heavy crate. Refrigeration or cold room are necessary once packed. If weather is warm harvesting what can be sold readily is best there is little worry about frosts from most varieties. Hardy varieties can be over-wintered and harvested in spring before they blossom.