

Leek

Coveted for their subtle onion flavor, leeks require from 75 to 150 days to mature, depending on the variety. They're easy to grow and store well when left in the garden. This is a prized vegetable among gourmets and is expensive in most stores. Leeks look like elongated onions and, when cut, unfold like a newspaper.

Varieties

Common varieties include 'Broad London' ('Large American Flag'), 'Giant Musselburgh,' and 'King Richard.'

Planting

Start seeds indoors eight weeks before outdoor planting (usually four weeks before the frost-free date). Give seedlings a crew cut whenever they grow taller than 3 inches. When planting seeds directly in the garden, sow ½ inch deep and cover with sifted soil. When plants are 8 inches tall, thin to 5 inches apart. Plant the thinned seedlings the same distance apart in another row. Space rows 1½ feet apart. When planting transplants, set them into a 6- to 8-inch-deep trench. As plants mature, fill in the trench to just below the leaves. This blanching procedure will produce tender, white stalks. The longer the white portion, the better the vegetable. Or, blanch the stems by piling soil up around them as the season progresses. Either method works well. Watch for onion thrips and root maggots, which you can kill with carbaryl and diazinon.

Care

Nip weeds as soon as they begin to invade the rows. A good mulch will make the job easier. If rain is insufficient, soak with a garden hose to maintain soil moisture. Sidedress with fertilizer throughout the growing season.

Harvest

Pull leeks when the stems are between 1 and 2 inches in diameter. Cut off the top leaves and the roots. Rinse the stems if you notice sand or soil

in the folds. Leeks are extremely tough and can withstand severe frost. To harvest all winter, apply a thick mulch before the ground hardens, then dig up stalks as you need them.