

How to Grow Leeks



Leeks are easily started in soilless mix. When they reach the thickness of a pencil lead, they can be transplanted outdoors.

The leek is not only a beloved vegetable and garden ornament, but also the Welsh national symbol. As such, an image of a leek is imprinted on the British pound coin every third year. Britain isn't the only country with a passion for leeks. In Prague, I've watched shoppers clamor to buy onions, which are expensive and scarce. Plain old leeks can be had for a pittance any time. In Europe, everyone grows

leeks. They are eaten daily, and are available in markets from Aberystwyth to Athens at low cost.

It's easy to grow your own. Using methods I've developed over several years, I enjoy an ample supply from late summer through spring.

A leek for every season

Leeks are a biennial member of the alliums, a tribe that includes onions, garlic, shallots, and chives. The white shank has a mild, almost sweet, onion flavor; the green tops are stronger tasting. I grow several varieties, sowing a spring crop to eat late summer into winter, and a fall crop to enjoy in the spring.

Leeks grow superbly in cool, rainy places. They don't mind warmer, drier climates, though, when pampered with lots of water and thick layers of mulch to keep the soil cool and the weeds at bay.

For spring leeks, sow in late summer

For leeks to overwinter, I plant seeds in flats in August, sowing thinly to avoid transplanting before setting out. If you live in warmer climate than Michigan's, you can start them through the end of September.

I start my seeds in soilless mix: equal parts perlite, peat moss, and sifted compost, with a handful of sand. I mix up a big plastic garbage can of the stuff, blending about 1 gallon of sand for every 8 of combined perlite, peat moss, and compost.

I leave August-sown seeds outside, protected from noontday sun. Then, about two weeks before setting out, I supplement their water with manure tea or fish emulsion twice weekly. Leeks are ready to be set out when they're about the thickness of household string or a pencil lead.

Leek culture

- Sow leeks indoors in late winter for fall harvest. Start more leeks in August for spring harvest.
- Grow them in soil that has plenty of compost and nitrogen.
- Don't let leeks lack for water.
- Once leeks start growing, hill them up every 2 weeks to get more of the white part.

Before planting, I double dig my beds. I mix the topsoil with compost plus a little sand for good drainage before placing it back in the bed. If this sounds like too much work, simply spread compost, leaf mold, or other organic matter on top of the garden and lightly fork it in. If accommodated in their predilection for fertile soil and ample water, leeks will reward you with bigger shanks, better texture, and sweeter flavor.

I plant leeks in trenches 6 in. deep. As they grow, I hill them up, piling an inch or two of soil around each plant or along the row every couple of weeks. Hiding the shank from light blanches it, producing more of the tender white part.

Watering well is important. I soak my beds twice a week. Leeks that suffer from lack of moisture grow unevenly, and have a stronger taste and pithier texture.

To overwinter leeks, I make sure to get them in the ground before frost. Then I bury them completely with straw or old, dry grass clippings. The first really cold night, I cover the whole bed with an old sheet. Early in spring, I remove the sheet, replacing it when nighttime temperatures plunge below 30°F. When the weather warms, I remove the mulch. I've had small but usable leeks as early as April.



As the leeks grow, hill them up. Pile an inch or so around each plant every few weeks to blanch the shaft.



Leave some leeks in the garden to set seed.

The second year, each grows a lovely starburst cluster of tiny whitish flowers on a long and delicately twisted stem. Once the florets are all open, it is three to four weeks before the tiny black seeds mature.

To harvest, dig and pull





To harvest, pull the leeks up by the stalk and shake off the excess soil.

Store leeks in a cool, dark spot. Place them horizontally in a box between layers of damp sand.