

Summer Spinach Alternatives

By Jill Nixon

When the temperatures soar, spinach wilts and is no more. However, all is not lost. There are many spinach alternatives that thrive in our warm wet summers so you can still have your leafy greens every day. Most of these cannot be bought from a shop, or even a market, so the best idea is to grow your own. Here is a summary. More details on each in the following pages. Why not give them a go?

NOTES:

All leafy greens benefit from regular application of fertilisers.

Propagate by cutting: Take 15-20cm cuttings. Strip the bottom leaves off. Bury half their length in a hole. Keep moist.

Scarify the seed with a file, sandpaper or even a knife to speed germination, which could take up to three weeks.

Oxalates are naturally-occurring substances found in plants, animals, and in humans. Our bodies always contain oxalates, and

our cells routinely convert other substances into oxalates. For example, vitamin C is one of the substances that our cells routinely convert into oxalates. In addition to the oxalates that are made inside of our body, oxalates can arrive at our body from the outside, from certain foods that contain them. Consumption of foods high in oxalates should be avoided or limited by those who have kidney disorders, gout and rheumatoid arthritis. Although many foods contain oxalate, only nine foods are known to increase oxalate in the urine and kidney stone formation. They are: beets, spinach, rhubarb, strawberries, nuts, chocolate, tea, wheat bran, and all dry beans (fresh, canned, or cooked), excluding lima and green beans.

<http://my.clevelandclinic.org/services/urology-kidney/treatments-procedures/kidney-stones-oxalate-controlled-diet>

To blanch: sit leaves for three minutes in boiling water, then rinse in cold water before using. This dissolves the oxalates. The water used for blanching should be tipped out and not used in the cooking.

Name/s	Latin name	Raw	Cooked	Comments
Pacific spinach; Aibika	<i>Abelmoschus manihot</i>	Yes	Yes	Propagate by cuttings. Perennial. Mucilage. Oxalates in large leaves. Mild flavour.
Brazilian spinach	<i>Alternanthera sisoo</i>	Yes	Yes	Propagate by cuttings. Perennial. Good taste. Crisp leaves.
Malabar spinach; Ceylon spinach	<i>Basella alba</i> (green) <i>Basella rubra</i> (red)	Yes	Yes	Propagate by cuttings or scarified seeds. Self seeds readily. Perennial. Tastes of citrus and pepper. Mucilage.
Water spinach; Kangkong	<i>Ipomoea aquatica</i> Ching Quat – green stem Pak Quat – white stem	Yes	Yes	Propagate by cuttings or seeds. No bitterness.
NZ spinach; Warrigal greens;	<i>Tetragonia expansa</i> (Australian native)		Yes	Propagate by cuttings or seeds. Perennial. Oxalates. Texture like spinach.
Egyptian spinach	<i>Corchorus olitorius</i>	Yes	Yes	Propagate by cuttings or seeds. Self-sows. Annual. Mucilage.
Surinam spinach; waterleaf	<i>Talinum fruticosum</i>	Yes	Yes	Propagate from cuttings or seeds. Short-lived perennial. Oxalates.
Betel leaf - not 'betel' for chewing	<i>Piper sarmentosum</i>	Yes	Yes	Propagate from cuttings. Perennial creeper.
Mushroom leaf plant	<i>Rungia klossii</i>	Yes	Yes	Propagate from cuttings. Perennial. Mild mushroom flavour. Crisp leaves.

Sambung; Life Extender (Malay)

Gynura procumbens

This vine grows 30-100cm and has a thick, fleshy feel. Stems are green with maybe purple tinges. Orange flowers (like milk thistle flowers) in spring. Makes a good ground cover. From the Asteraceae (daisy) family, Sambung likes full sun to part shade and needs ample water and rich, fertile well-drained soil. Keep mulched and give a good haircut throughout the year to stop it taking over.

Isabell Shipard tells how wonderful this plant is: "...it is noted for its anti-viral, antihistamine, anti-cancer, anti-allergy properties, and is also a blood cleanser, tonic, diuretic and pain killer." She recommends taking 2-3 leaves a day as a routine for its health benefits.

The leaves have a mild flavour (some say better than spinach, others say they taste like green beans) and can be used raw in salads, added to soups, stir-fries, rice dishes, casseroles, and sauces. Use fresh or dried leaves for tea.



Malabar spinach; Ceylon spinach

Basella alba (green) *Basella rubra* (red)

Perennial twining vine with rounded dark green leaves that vary in size with age. Needs vertical supports and hot temperature to thrive. Leaves are mucilaginous and high in calcium and vitamins A and C.

It prefers a moist fertile soil with plenty of organic matter and a pH of 6.5-6.8. Can be grown in part shade (which increases leaf size) but prefers heat, humidity and full sun exposure. Keep very moist to prevent flowering, which makes leaves bitter.

Propagate by stem cuttings – just stick them in the soil and wait. Self sows from seed, or plant the seeds after scarifying – scratch the seed with a file, sandpaper or knife to speed germination, which could take up to 3 weeks.

Eaten raw in a salad it has juicy, crisp flavours of citrus and pepper. Cook it in soups, stir-fries and curries where it holds up better than regular spinach and doesn't wilt as rapidly.



Surinam Spinach *Talinum triangulare*

Tender perennial that grows erect, reaching a height of 30-100cm. It bears small pink flowers and broad, fleshy leaves. Widely grown in tropical regions as a leaf vegetable.

It prefers moist, humus-rich fertile soil but will tolerate poor soils. pH 5–6.5. Propagate from cuttings which root readily, or from seed (it will self-seed). Germination takes place after about five days, subsequent growth is very rapid if adequate water is supplied.

Leaves and flowers can be eaten raw, but this plant contains oxalic acid, so be careful not to eat too much. It has a light bitterness that adds a nice variation to a mix of salad greens, and the flowers in a salad are lovely too.

Cook like regular spinach and discard any cooking liquid because of oxalic acid. Best lightly steamed, they should not be overcooked or they will become excessively soft and mucilaginous. Rich in iron, calcium, vitamins A and C.



Native Spinach; Warrigal greens; New Zealand Spinach

Tetragonia expansa

An Australian native, it is also known as Botany Bay greens, New Zealand spinach and native spinach. Long-lived, it has a sprawling habit and has weed potential as it self-sows readily. The triangular green leaves are fleshy and succulent. Tolerates heat, drought and frost- very hardy, pest and disease resistant.

Prefers loose well-drained soil in full sun, although semi-shade is preferred in very dry areas. Mulch well. Grow from seeds – soak first to soften outer skin. Propagate by cuttings.

Cook young leaves and stems as for spinach, which it looks and tastes like. It has high oxalate content, so not for eating raw.



Mushroom plant *Rungia klossii*

Low-growing perennial to 60cm; prefers partial shade. It gets its common name from the slight mushroom flavour of the leaves. The dark green, thick and crunchy glossy leaves are ornamental with a lighter green marking. Pretty sky - blue flowers in spring. A superb tropical and sub-tropical green.

Propagate from cuttings and plant at 60cm intervals. It will tolerate most soils but prefers rich moist loam that is not soggy. Happy in semi-shade to full sun and grows profusely when well-watered and fertilised.

Use young leaves and stems raw in salads and sandwiches, quiches and omelettes. As a green vegetable, its crisp mildly mushroom-flavoured leaves can be added to soups and stir-fries at the end of cooking to ensure full flavour. Contains iron and vitamins A and C.



Egyptian Spinach

Corchorus olitorius

Hardy fast-growing annual to one metre. Once known as the food of the Pharaohs, it has been cultivated for thousands of years and is recognised for its medicinal and nutritional qualities.

Sow seeds in summer time and keep moist. Self sows readily once established. Prefers very fertile soil and a hot, humid climate. Tolerates both wet and dry soils and needs full sun. Has weed potential, so take care.

The youngest leaves and immature fruits are used in salads and the older leaves cooked as spinach. It is mucilaginous when cooked. The dried leaves can be used as a thickener in soups. Tea is also made from the dried leaves. High in iron, protein, calcium, folic acid and vitamins A and C.



Betel Leaf; Wild Pepper

Piper sarmentosum (not to be confused with 'betel' for chewing - *Piper betel*)

Evergreen, perennial creeper to one metre high. It has glossy heart-shaped leaves to 15cm with small white flower spikes. A vigorous grower, it is useful as a groundcover, although it can be difficult to remove because of its suckering habit. A pot may be more suitable in hot wet climates.

Grows best in rich, well-drained soil in semi-shade. Keep moist but not soggy. Propagate from cuttings in summertime and plant up to one metre apart.

Leaves have a mildly spicy taste and can be eaten raw, sliced when young, used to line platters, or for wraps. Edible green/brown jelly-like fruits develop from the white flower spikes.



Cranberry Hibiscus

Hibiscus acetosella

Short-lived perennial shrub in the subtropics related to the rosella. It grows rapidly to 1.7m high, and has deeply cut leaves similar to maple. The deep cranberry red leaf is highly ornamental; the edible flowers are a very pretty rose-pink.

A hardy plant, it thrives in warmth and wet. Grow in full sun or part shade. It loves ample water, rich, fertile and well-drained soil that is kept mulched.

The young leaves have a pleasantly tart flavour - raw in salads or cooked as for spinach - as they contain oxalic acid. Do not eat large amounts. Leaves retain their colour when cooked.



Okinawa Spinach

Gynura crepiodes

A dense, low growing plant to 70cm. Low-maintenance perennial leaf vegetable, it is hardy and relatively pest-free. Thrives in warm, wet conditions (e.g. our summers).

Attractive plant with shiny leaves that are green on top and purple beneath; flowers are very small and orange. Grows best in full sun to part shade and needs ample water and rich, fertile, well-drained soil that is kept mulched.

Okinawa has been used or is being investigated for its anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, and anti-cancer properties. It is also known as cholesterol spinach, and there are many claims that it lowers cholesterol.

Very nutritious eaten raw or cooked. Leaves and shoots are steamed, used in stir-fry, tempura, stews and soups. Young leaves taste better than older leaves.



Aibika; Pacific Spinach; Queensland Greens; Hibiscus Spinach *Abelmoschus manihot*

Many types – different leaf shapes. The most popular leafy green eaten throughout the Pacific. Ideal for northern Australia. Attractive planted in groups in the garden providing a cool microclimate under its large leaves. Two main types grown locally, either finger-like leaves or a tri-lobed form. Large leaves contain oxalates.

Easy to grow in full sun or part shade, but prone to insect attack—grasshoppers and leaf curl caterpillars find it delicious. Growing near chillies and/or basil helps to protect it. It should be mulched regularly with compost and pruned down to about one metre (it can reach a height of four metres), to prevent it toppling and damaging neighbouring plants.

The large leaves, hibiscus-like flowers and stalks can be eaten. Stalks have a crisp celery-like flavour eaten raw or cooked. If overcooked leaves are mucilaginous, which helps to thicken stews. Use as a spinach substitute. High in protein, folic acid, iron, potassium, magnesium and calcium. Ideal vegetable for toddler's food as it is soft and easily digested.



Aibika



Brazilian spinach

Kangkong; Water Spinach *Ipomoea aquatica*

Semiaquatic, tropical plant grown as a vegetable for its tender shoots and leaves. It is found throughout tropical and subtropical regions of the world. It's delicious, it grows really fast and you can pick it all year round.

Propagate by cuttings or seeds and fertilise regularly as it is very hungry. Kangkong likes to grow in very damp soil or even in water.

There are two major cultivars of water spinach - *Ching Quat* (known as "green stem") has narrow, pointed leaves and white flowers and is adapted for moist soils. It can be grown in garden beds and pots, provided there is always plenty of moisture. *Pak Quat* (known as "white stem") has broad, arrow-shaped leaves and pink flowers. It is adapted to aquatic conditions so can grow in a tub of water with liquid fertilisers.

Like most greens, kangkong is high in iron, but it's not even the slightest bit bitter. Use the thin stems and the leaves in salads and stir-fries (add the leaves at the end).



Kangkong Ching Quat



Kangkong Pak Quat

Brazilian Spinach

Alternanthera sissou

Perennial, low-growing, bright green crisp crinkled leaves, it forms a dense clump to 30cm high. Grow as an edible ground cover or an attractive low-maintenance garden edging.

Full sun to semi shade. Loves warmth and moisture, but not wet feet. Prefers rich loam. Propagate by cuttings 60cm apart.

Good alternative to spinach in our hot summer. Nice taste without mucilage. Steam or use in stir-fries or curries – maintains its crispness when cooked. Can be eaten raw, it contains very minimal amounts of oxalates.