

New Zealand Spinach

Scientific name. Tetragonia tetragoniodes

Common Names: Cook's cabbage

Origin: New Zealand, Australia, and Japan

Pests and Diseases: No serious pests or disease problems

Varieties: Maori is the most commonly grown variety.

Zones: Annual in zone 5, perennial in warmer climates

Description:

New Zealand spinach is a perennial vegetable grown as a tender annual. It is a low-growing, weak-stemmed leafy plant that can spread several feet wide and grow to one foot tall. It has succulent, triangular- to oval-shaped leaves that are pale to dark green and grow from 2 to 4 inches long. The leaves of New Zealand spinach are smaller and fuzzier than those of regular spinach. New Zealand spinach has small yellow flowers and conical capsules.

Cultivation:

Plant New Zealand spinach in full sun. New Zealand spinach prefers moisture-retentive, well-drained soil rich in organic matter. New Zealand spinach is weak-stemmed and will appear to trail across the garden. Set plants in hills similar to squash. New Zealand spinach prefers a soil pH of 6.8 to 7.0. Prepare planting beds with well aged compost. Where summer heat is intense, plant New Zealand spinach where it will get partial shade in the afternoon.

Planting time.

New Zealand spinach grows best as a warm-weather annual in temperatures ranging from 60° to 75°F. Sow New Zealand spinach in the garden about the date of the average last frost in spring or later. Start New Zealand spinach indoors 2 to 3 weeks before the last frost in spring for later transplanting. New Zealand spinach is not frost hardy like true spinach. Plant New Zealand spinach in the warm part of the year when regular spinach will not grow. The plant is drought tolerant but the leaves will not be as tender. New Zealand spinach requires 55 to 65 days to reach harvest.

Planting and spacing.

The seeds are difficult to germinate with only a 40% germination rate. The best results are to scarify the seeds by gently running an emery board across the surface and placing them on a damp paper towel in a sealed container.

Sow New Zealand spinach 1/2 inch deep and 2 to 4 inches apart. New Zealand spinach grows from seed clusters that produce several seedlings, similar to beet seed. Soak seeds overnight in water to speed germination. When seedlings are 3 inches tall, thin to the strongest seedlings, from 12 to 18 inches apart. Set New Zealand spinach in hills similar to squash. This will allow the weak-stem to sprawl. Space hills or rows 24 to 36 inches apart.

Water and feeding.

Keep New Zealand spinach evenly moist; water regularly for rapid, full growth. Do not let the soil dry out. New Zealand spinach is drought tolerant once established but leaves will not be as tender or flavorful. Mulch to retain soil moisture. Prepare planting beds with aged compost. Side dress plants with aged compost at mid season.

Companion plants.

Strawberries. Avoid planting New Zealand spinach in the shade of tall plants such as corn or pole beans.

Container growing.

New Zealand spinach will grow well in containers. Grow two plants in a 5-gallon pot.

Harvest:

New Zealand spinach will be ready for harvest 55 to 65 days after sowing. Cut young leaves and tender leaf tips for the best flavor. This cut-and-come-again harvest will encourage new growth and a longer harvest.

Storing and preserving.

New Zealand spinach will keep in the refrigerator for up to one week. New Zealand spinach can be frozen canned or dried.

Uses:

The cooked leaves taste like spinach. They can be sauteed in olive oil with fresh garlic. They can also be wilted on pizza and blanched and added to pasta.

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