Swiss Chard
By Trudy Hodges

Classification
Chard is a chenopod, a group which is a subfamily within the Amaranthaceae family, genus *Beta* and species *vulgaris.* Chard shares a common ancestry with beets.
Chard is also known by its many common names: Swiss chard, stem chard, silverbeet, perpetual spinach, spinach beet, crab beet, bright lights, seakale beet, and leaf beet.
Planting requirements
Chard only needs 50°F soil to germinate, and the plants are quite cold hardy. Germination can be spotty in temperatures above 80°F. Shade the soil if seeds are planted in the heat of summer.
In spring, sow seeds directly in the garden two weeks before the last frost date, or start seeds indoors three to four weeks before the last frost date and set seedlings out just as the last frost passes.
In fall, start seeds about 10 weeks before the first frost date, and set the seedlings out when they are four weeks old. (At our altitude there may not be a difference)
Prepare a rich, fertile bed by loosening the soil while mixing in compost and a balanced organic fertilizer, applied at label rates. Plant seeds half an inch deep and 3 inches apart. Set out seedlings 12 inches apart. Chard is wind-pollinated.
Chard is winter-hardy to about 15°F.
Harvesting
Chard can be harvested while the leaves are young and tender, or after maturity when they are larger and have slightly tougher stems. Frequent picking helps to stimulate the production of new leaves, but be sure to leave the growing crown intact. Harvesting is a continuous process. Rinse leaves with cool water and immediately shake off the excess moisture, store in the refrigerator up to four days.
Pests
Prevent leaf-miner infestations by planting chard in an area far from spinach and beets and in a location where spinach, beets, and chard have not been grown for two years. Cercospora leaf spot is a fungal disease that causes light brown patches surrounded by purple halos to form on leaves of chard, beets, and spinach. Keep plants spaced to promote good air circulation and remove any affected leaves.

leaves.
Saving Seeds
Chard is a biennial plant, which produces flowers and seeds in the spring of its second year. Look for greenish flowers followed by seed capsules clustered close to the stem. When the stems dry to brown, crush them inside a paper bag, and gather the largest seeds that fall to the bottom. Store them in a cool, dry place. Chard seeds will keep for at least three years, and often longer.
Uses
Raw chard is extremely perishable. Fresh, young chard can be used raw in salads. Mature chard leaves and stalks are typically cooked or sautéed; their bitterness fades with cooking.
Excess chard can be blanched and frozen, or leaves can be dried and the ‘flakes’ added

to soups, stews, or smoothies. Chard stems make fermented pickles, or pickle the stems and leaves together with a standard vinegar-sugar brine before sealing the jars in a water bath canner.

Swiss chard is high in vitamins A, K, and C, all parts of the chard plant contain oxalic acid.

Varieties

Chard varieties come with a range of rib and vein colors, so try planting a couple of different ones. ‘Fordhook Giant’ snow-white ribs. 'Rhubarb' has rich, bright red stems and veins. 'Bright Lights' was named an All-America Selections winner in 1998 for its stunning array of gold, orange, yellow, pink, and even purple stems.

Bright Lights
Fordhook Giant
Rainbow
Rhubarb
Ruby Red

References

Organic Gardening
Mother Earth News
Explore Cornell-Howe Gardening