

Year Round Gardening

GROWING MICROGREENS

By Susan Christine Jones, Colorado Master Gardener

As autumn advances, gardeners think of ways to extend the growing season and access to garden fresh produce from home. Growing microgreens indoors can provide a supply of fresh, local greens year round. Microgreens are young herb and vegetable seedlings consumed in their immature state, around 2 inches tall, or grown to a more mature state for use as baby salad greens.

Microgreens should not be confused with sprouts - an important category distinction when it comes to food safety. Both sprouts and microgreens are nutrient rich - but sprouts carry a high risk of food born illness and microbial contamination according to the FDA. Sprouts are seeds germinated in water and consumed without true leaves. Microgreens require both a growing medium and light source, and are cut and consumed without the root.

To get started you need clean, shallow trays or containers 2 – 3.5 inches deep, light potting mix for seedlings, a spray bottle, and untreated or certified organic seeds.

Not all seeds are safe to use for microgreens. Commercial seeds are often chemically treated with fungicides and pesticides to prevent mold or insects and animals eating them during storage. Complete growing kits are available at garden centers, or use items from your home. Plastic take-out containers with lids make ideal growing containers. Seed companies offer an assortment of mixtures specifically for growing microgreens that range from mild to spicy. Grow single



varieties or create your own custom blends. When mixing a variety of seeds in the same tray be sure to pair seeds with similar germination rates.

Prepare your growing containers by disinfecting with a 10% solution of chlorine bleach. Place around an inch of moistened potting mix in the containers. Sprinkle seeds evenly over growing medium, then top with a tiny bit more potting mix to hold seeds in place. Approximately 2-3 teaspoons will plant a 10 x 20 inch tray with cabbage or similar sized seeds; radish and other tiny seeds will use 2-3 tablespoons. Use a spray bottle to mist gently without dislodging seeds. Keep containers moist, and in a warm place – like on top of the fridge. Use a lid, or plastic wrap to cover containers until the seeds have sprouted. Then remove the humidity cover and move to a place where seedlings will receive at least 4 hours of bright light per day. A sunny window is ideal, but an artificial light source like a simple fluorescent fixture works fine.

Begin harvesting as soon as the first two leaves form when they are approximately 2 inches tall. This takes 1-2 weeks depending on variety. Use scissors to clip greens near their base. Some varieties will regrow a couple of times before replanting. Harvest just before use for best taste. Microgreens have a short shelf life, but can be stored in an airtight container in the refrigerator for 5-6 days. Use them in a variety of dishes for a healthy dose of vitamins and phytonutrients. Popular seed choices for microgreens include: mustard, lettuce, radish, arugula, beet, basil, cabbage, spinach, peas, mizuna, tatsoi, watercress, chard, chevril, kohlrabi, sorrel, broccolli, cilantro, turnip, cauliflower, amaranth, parsley, pak choi, sunflower, and mixes such as mesclun. Get creative and experiment with unusual varieties.

For additional information see:

Fact Sheet # 9.373. Health Benefits and Safe Handling of Salad Greens, at www.ext.colostate.edu.

When you have questions, Colorado State University Extension has research-based answers. Get answers to your horticulture questions by visiting www.ask.extension.org .