Asian Greens

Known for producing wonderful leafy greens, Yuma is also home to the winter production of Asian greens. Acreage ranging around 800 acres in the region, Asian greens are relatively easy to prepare (no trimming, peeling, or other busy work), quick to cook, and versatile—excellent in stir-fries, sautés, and soups. In addition, they are crunchy, delicious, and nutritious. In fact, they are the original fast food—quick and healthy—as far as you can get from those “fat foods” masquerading as “fast foods” all around us.

Asian greens are in the crucifer family, the superstars of good-for-you food. Cruciferous plants provide an abundance of vitamins A and C, potassium, calcium, folic acid, beta-carotene, zinc, manganese, and magnesium. They are also low in calories and high in fiber. If you think you eat a lot of greens, compare yourself to the Chinese, who typically eat one pound of greens a day, one-half of which are from the Crucifer family.

Asian greens have been cultivated in China since at least from the 5th century and made their way to Europe in the mid-18th century. Soon after, Asian greens arrived in North America, but it is only in the last decade or so that Asian greens have moved into the mainstream.

Most Asian greens are cool-weather crops, preferring a temperature range of 55º-75ºF. A touch of frost on mature Asian greens increases sugar concentrations and reduces sulfur compounds, resulting in rich sweet flavors.

When shopping for Asian greens, look for crisp, glossy plants that show no signs of limpness, dryness or crushed or bruised leaves.

Most Asian greens have two Chinese names (Cantonese and Mandarin) and a Japanese name as well as a multitude of regional names. The variety of Asian greens available in the U.S. seems to increase almost daily, and each kind is liable to appear under numerous aliases.

World cuisine has introduced Asian greens to cooks everywhere. These piquant leaves are a boon, for most varieties are quick and easily grown. Like all Brassicas, Asian greens prefer cool temperatures and evenly moist soil.

Most of the Asian greens are from the mustard rather than the lettuce family. That puts them in the Brassica family — the same family of broccoli and cabbage that boosts nutrition. Radishes are in the same family and share a love for cooler temperatures and a tendency to become sharply spicy with age and heat. Like cabbages, they are sensitive to similar pests, like the flea beetle or cabbage looper. Asian greens can form the backbone to a delicious collection of Far Eastern cuisines.

Asian greens are the underappreciated and unsung hero of leafy vegetables. They are a nutritious leafy green, high in vitamins A and C, calcium, potassium, phosphorous, and iron. Leafy Asian greens can be included in salad mixes, where—along with their nutritional prize—they add a distinctive taste to mild lettuce-based salads. At mid maturity they contribute to stir fry dishes. And at full maturity, they offer an amazing amount of high-nutrition enjoyment.

Most North Americans can remember when the choice of salad greens was limited to iceberg or Boston bib lettuce. Even today in small towns, iceberg lettuce is the “salad“. Iceberg is sturdy and lasts for weeks if properly refrigerated, but unfortunately lacks taste — and many consider it bland! Today people are gastronomically adventurous and look for interesting salads, salad combination, textures, and flavors.

Asian greens aid digestion, provide fiber and diversity in both taste and texture.

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