ESCAROLE

The origin of escarole is Europe although some have thought it to be native to Sicily. It is a widely distributed plant. From a very early period it was used as a vegetable by the Egyptians, and Greeks. Ovid mentions it in his tale of Philemon and Baucis; and the Roman Pliny states it was eaten in his time (23-79 AD) as a salad and pot-herb. It was in cultivation in England as early as 1548. It is not known when escarole was first used in the U.S., but in 1806 the green curled and the broad-leaved types were mentioned as being in cultivation, used primarily a salad plant.

A wild from of escarole has leaves with a red midrib and is considered as the near prototype of the Magdeburg large-rooted, Red Italian escarole. These large-rooted varieties were first cultivated in France in 1826.

Escarole grows in bunchy heads with narrow, ragged-edged leaves that curl at the end. The center is yellow-white. Avoid heads with wilted or browning leaves. Look for crisp heads that are bright green.

Escarole is a popular addition to salads because it adds texture and taste. French, garlic and cheese dressings complement escarole’s flavor. Escarole can also be used as a base for salads.

Escarole can be baked in casseroles or other dishes. It can also be stuffed and baked. Escarole can be used as a wrapping for meat or fish.

Escarole can be used as a boiled vegetable in soups. It can also be sautéed and served with meat or seafood. To prepare an escarole, slice off one-eighth inch of the stem. With a paring knife, cut a cone shape about one-half inch deep from the stem end. Escarole is excellent when sautéed with seafood. It also adds texture and flavor when tossed with pasta. Escarole can be boiled in soups and when cooking soup with escarole, use a large amount of water when boiling to create a milder flavor.

Escarole does not freeze well.

Escarole is fat-free, low in sodium, cholesterol-free, low in calories and high in folate. Escarole contains only 20 calories and has 65% of the recommended daily allowance of vitamin A.

The chicory clan—Belgian endive, radicchio, and escarole—is sneaking into more and more produce sections. But, raw might not be the best way for these greens to win us over; a little heat softens their bitter edge. In France, Belgian escarole is commonly braised until it's tender and sweet. In Italy, red escarole is sautéed or braised until it's limp and deeply flavored. The Italians also add escarole to soup for a fresh shot of green.

In 2006, Yuma County producers grew a little over 250 acres of escarole, valued at $1.2 million. It is grown like lettuce on narrow beds, and harvested by hand. Seed is sown in early fall and is ready for harvest in about 75 days. The interior leaves are often blanched by the outer leaves when they are about ten inches tall.

Escarole has broad, slightly curved, pale green leaves with a milder flavor than either Belgian or curly escarole. It is popular as a salad green, eaten raw with mayonnaise or a vinaigrette
dressing. When cooked, the greens are often served as a vegetable steamed or braised and can be added to soups for flavoring in the later stages of soup making.

Escarole is a good source of iron and an excellent source of vitamin A. The bitter flavor is believed to stimulate the flow of digestive juices and thus, can serve as an aid to digestion.

Escarole (Cichorium endivia) and its closely related cousin, the common chicory (Cichorium intybus) are members of the Composite family. Escarole has two forms, narrow-leaved escarole called curly escarole and a broad-leaved escarole. The outside leaves of an escarole head are green and bitter. The inner leaves of the escarole head are light green to creamy-white and milder flavored. Both types of escarole are used in salad mixtures with blander-flavored lettuce to prepare a salad with a "little bite" to the flavor.

For people who enjoy using escarole in various dishes, escarole is a form of chicory that is both versatile and tasty. Sometimes referred to as broad chicory or common chicory, escarole is a salad green that can make the difference between ordinary and outstanding.

Characterized by broad outer leaves, this member of the chicory clan does have a slightly bitter taste, but much less so than many other forms of escarole. With a crinkled shape to the leaves, escarole is an example of greens that provide various degrees of flavor as the outer leaves are removed. While the outer leaves are a dark green, peeling back a layer will reveal a lighter shade of green. As more layers are peeled back, the leaves continue to lighten in shade. As the shade of the leaves lightens, the degree of bitter taste also lessens. The result is that it is possible to use different layers of escarole to achieve the taste you want with the dish you are preparing.

Perhaps the simplest of all dishes to prepare with escarole is a simple escarole salad. Using the lighter leaves, gently tear them into smaller pieces and toss the leaves in a vinaigrette dressing or even a simple dressing made with mayonnaise and sugar. Lightly coat the leaves and then add cherry tomatoes cut in half, raisins for texture, and your favorite croutons. As a simple salad course, this is a nice variation on the usual green salad, while still providing a lot of visual interest and taste.

Escarole can also be cooked and added to many different types of dishes. As an example, the darker outer leaves are ideal for braising or steaming. Prepared with a little garlic powder and pepper, the leaves will lose a small amount of the bitter taste and form the perfect pocket for a section of boneless chicken or fish.

When it comes to soup, escarole can be cut into fine strips and added as a green to just about any type of soup. Escarole can be used in vegetable soups, as an ingredient in various types of chick pea soups, and even as a nice touch in old favorites like egg drop soup.

Finding escarole is usually not hard to do. Supermarkets and other food outlets tend to carry escarole as one of their basic green selection. While its is true that escarole usually costs a little more than most salad items, the fact is that the vegetable provides a great deal of flavor that simply cannot be achieved with lettuce and similar greens. At the same time, escarole also is a good source of a number of vitamins and nutrients, which helps to make it as important in the diet as the use of spinach or kale. Between the added taste, the versatility of use in various dishes, and the vitamins and nutrients provided in each serving, escarole is an excellent food choice.

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