



Spinach Trials 98

by

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Spinach salad. Spinach souffle. Spinach noodles. Steamed spinach with lemon juice! However you like it, spinach is revered by some for its tangy flavor in salads and high Vitamin A and iron content. It is equally reviled by others who have vivid childhood memories of limp masses of stringy, sour overcooked leaves swimming in a pool of lemon juice. Only the spinach lovers need read further.

Spinach is not the easiest vegetable to grow because it bolts (forms flowers and seeds) rapidly in response to long day-lengths and warm temperatures. For the past 30 years, horticulturists at the Experiment farm have tested spinach cultivars, ever on the lookout for a great tasting variety that is slow to bolt. In 1998, we renewed the quest to find the perfect spinach with the assistance of Reg Yapple, Denali Seed Co, Anchorage. Reg gave us five spinach cultivars to compare against our standard recommended cultivar, 'Melody'. Two of the cultivars were savoy types (crinkly leaves): 'Melody' and 'Tyee'. The remaining cultivars were the smooth leaf type: 'Teton', 'Medania', 'Grodane' and 'Hybrid 457'.

Spinach was direct seeded on 27 May. 'Tyee' emerged first on 31 May, followed by 'Melody', 'Teton', 'Medania' and 'Grodane' on 1 June and 'Hybrid 457' on 2 June. 'Hybrid 457' had spotty germination, but all the other cultivars grew well. 'Tyee' began to bolt on 27 June, but all other cultivars quickly followed on 29 June. All spinach was harvested on 30 June.

And now came the fun part. We organized a taste panel to identify which cultivar was preferred by consumers. Every employee at the Garden and Experiment farm and any student, faculty or staff member who happened to be in the building, was asked to participate. We gave a few tourists and bus drivers a truly unique experience when they visited the Garden. They graciously extended their stay to graze on plates of fresh spinach leaves.

'Tyee' and 'Melody' were rated the highest on appearance. Both of these cultivars were savoy types. 'Melody' was rated highest in flavor followed by 'Hybrid 457' and 'Tyee'. The cultivar chosen as the one most likely to be purchased was 'Melody', and the least likely were 'Teton' and 'Hybrid 457'. Since no cultivar showed any greater resistance to bolting than any other, and the taste panel chose a clear winner, 'Melody' remains the recommended spinach cultivar for Fairbanks.

Originally published in Georgeson Botanical Garden
Review Vol. 7, No. 3, 1998

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