

Swiss chard

I was surprised to realize after 18 years of writing this series of articles that I haven't done one on Swiss chard. This is a vegetable that we don't eat very often but we keep it growing most of the time. A couple of plants supply more than we can use and most of it goes to Juan, the gardener. Chard isn't something I would expect to see in the local Mexican restaurants but I've learned that it's a very popular green south of the border.

Swiss chard is classified in the same subspecies (*Beta vulgaris vulgaris*) as the other cultivated beets, all descended from the wild sea beet, native to the Mediterranean and European Atlantic coasts. The seed, actually a fruit, forms a cluster that produces several plants. It can be sown directly in the ground but I usually start it in a 4-inch container, letting the plant reach 3 to 4 inches in height before setting it out. That saves space in a bed for a few weeks and lets me place the seedling exactly where I want it. The plants produce edible leaves and stems over many months. As the plant gets older, the base gets thickened and tough while the leaves become smaller. At that point they should be replaced. They should also be removed when they show signs of bolting, which is likely to occur when the weather warms up after the plant has wintered over. Chard is more tolerant of partial shade than many other vegetables and so we plant it in one of the beds that we don't use during the winter because they are shaded by the neighbour's hedge on the south side of our lot.

I don't usually fertilize them. Most sources on the web recommend 5-10-10, probably just pasted from one article to another. Using a low-nitrogen fertilizer doesn't make much sense to me since you want leaves, not flowers or fruit. Chard isn't much troubled by diseases or pests. Snails may munch on the leaves but have little impact on the growth of such a vigorous plant.

Swiss chard is an attractive plant with brightly coloured stems that can be white, yellow, pink or red. I had supposed that the multicoloured plants from seed packages sold as 'Bright Lights' contained a mixture of several varieties. In fact, 'Bright Lights' is a single cultivar and it's a good choice if you want to plant Swiss chard in a flower bed, where it can be quite ornamental. I can't discern much difference in taste between varieties but you may want to grow more than one, just for their striking colours. Perhaps the white-stemmed variety, 'Lucullus', is a bit milder than the others, and it is more tolerant of summer heat.

Curiously, in France where chard is very popular, the leaves are sometimes discarded while the stems are cooked. The opposite is true in America and I have to say that we prefer the leaves. Some recipes recommend serving the leaves and the stems separately and the leaves certainly do require less cooking.