Spinach beet (Swiss chard)

Spinach beet is also known as Swiss chard, or spinach.

Real spinach, however, belongs to a different genus, is more difficult to grow, and gives a lower yield.

Spinach beet contains more vitamin B than spinach.

It can withstand hot conditions and resist diseases better than spinach.

The leaves of spinach beet, like those of real spinach, are eaten and are very nutritious, containing many minerals of which iron is the most important.

When to plant

• Spinach beet prefers cool weather. In warm, frost-free areas the crop does best if sown from February to July. In very cold regions it is sown from August to October and possibly in January and February.

• It can withstand cold, but the growth rate will be slower in winter and the plant will run to seed in spring.

• In most other parts of the country January to March and July to October are the best months for planting.

• Keeping the soil moist will make the plants more tolerant to heat.
Where to plant
Spinach beet can be grown on a wide variety of soils, but soils containing large quantities of organic material give the best results.

The soil must be prepared well and manure or compost as well as 2:3:2 or 3:2:1 fertiliser added.

Make sure that the manure and compost are well decomposed before adding them.

Sowing
The seed is usually sown direct in the vegetable beds although the seedlings can be transplanted if necessary.

Each cork-like seed in fact contains a number of seeds and thinning out the seedlings later on will be necessary.

Rake the soil so that it is very fine without any clods.

Draw shallow furrows about 1 to 2 cm deep and 35 to 45 cm apart.

Sow the seeds about 6 to 8 cm apart in the furrows.

Cover with soil and firm down gently.

Caring for the plants
• After about a week the seeds will emerge.
• When the plants are 8 cm high (after ± 2 weeks) thin out to leave only one plant in each position.
• If you wait another week, the extra plants can be dug out carefully, retaining the soil on their roots, and planted in an extra row. They can also be used to fill gaps.

• Ultimately the seedlings should be 15 to 25 cm apart in the rows.

• Give enough water.

• Pull up weeds regularly.

• Be on the lookout for pests and diseases.

• As the leaves are picked over a long period, give a side-dressing every month or apply liquid manure every 2 weeks.

• Using a compost or manure mulch is also recommended.

**Harvesting**

• About 8 to 10 weeks after sowing the outer leaves will be more or less 20 cm high and can be picked. Always leave 2 or 3 full-sized leaves on the plant after picking because overpicking weakens the plant.

• Do not leave them on the plant too long for they will become tough. Pick at least once a week or once every 2 weeks.

• Cut the leaves off near ground level, taking care not to harm the younger leaves, or pull them off with a sideways twist, without pulling up the plants or damaging their roots.

• When the plants stop growing and send up a seed stalk, remove the plants and add them to the compost heap.

• It is better to sow a few rows every few weeks rather than to try keeping the plants for too long.

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For further information contact your nearest extension officer.
Acknowledgement

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