

WHAT'S IN SEASON

It's a Green Spring Thing!

BY BARBARA KOBSAR



Just as those flower bulbs, the daffodils and tulips, welcome the start of the new growing season, the first spring onions and green garlic at the farmers markets do the same. These once-a-year crops show up for only a brief but delectable moment.

SPRING ONIONS

How is a spring onion different from a green onion or scallion? It's all a matter of maturity. The scallion is the youngest, having been pulled from the ground before its bulb has formed. A green onion has been allowed to develop a very tiny bulb, but its stalks are still delicate. A spring onion is more developed than a green onion but less mature than one of those big, round, everyday onions. Spring onions with their bright green stalks, are not "keepers" like dry onions. You might store them for a week in a plastic bag in the refrigerator, but the rule of thumb is to buy them fresh each week to enjoy while the season is upon us.

When baking spring onions, try leaving the root intact to hold the layers together, and leave 2 to 3 inches of greens to add some character to the dish. Slice the onions lengthwise in half, place cut side down in a baking dish and they're ready for a splash of extra virgin olive oil, kosher salt, and freshly ground black pepper. Bake (do not overcrowd the dish) at 350° for about 5 minutes. These are delicious served alongside sugar snap peas, new potatoes, or risotto. If you're slicing spring onions to sauté as a topping for your grilled spring asparagus, don't hesitate to slice up some of the green stalks as well.

GREEN GARLIC

Green garlic is subtle and mild, easy to use, and easy to sniff out at the markets. Bunches of green garlic look similar to green onions or very small leeks. A slight purple tinge on the bunch and a quick sniff will let you know it's green garlic.

Garlic is planted in fall, and in spring, it sends up a long stem with a flower bud at the top. This "scape" or stem, as well as the bud, are wonderful to eat and cook with, since they have only a mild garlic flavor. Cutting this stem off the plant is necessary if

you want the garlic bulb to form. If the garlic flower is left to bloom, all the energy goes to the flower.

The harvesting of green garlic is part of the spring ritual of thinning the rows. If some of the immature garlic plants, with their green shoots, are pulled up, it leaves room for adjacent bulbs left in the ground to develop into heads.

By April or May, the maturing garlic that has been left in the ground is more pungent. At this stage the base of each garlic plant is swelling to a solid bulb and on its way to forming individual cloves. Once they are fully mature, the heads of garlic can be pulled up and used while the outer skin is still moist. If left to dry, the skin becomes papery the way we're accustomed to seeing it in the garlic we use year round. As it ages, the cloves will eventually begin to sprout, and then they become less appealing for cooking. However, these sprouting cloves can be useful for sticking into the soil around your indoor potted plants, since they serve as a natural pest deterrent.

In the few weeks when green garlic is in the market, I use it with abandon. I simply trim off the root end, slice the stalks and some of the stem on the diagonal, and toss into a pan with a little olive oil to sauté with asparagus, rapini greens, or spinach. Adding a splash of brandy or saké is one of my favorite tricks for bringing out the inherent sweetness in green garlic.

BRAISING GREENS

Spring is still a time to enjoy the braising greens—those sturdy, frost-hardy plants with the robust flavors. Kale, chard, mustard greens, dandelion greens, and tat soi all liven up soups, stews, and sautéed dishes.

Tatsoi is a most versatile green since it's tender enough to serve with other greens in a salad but hardy enough to stand up to the sauté or braising pan. Once considered a specialty Asian green it's now easy to find at the farmers markets. Its very dark green, spoon shaped leaves are a nutrient warehouse full of calcium and vitamins.

My favorite green, unequivocally, is arugula. It can give the pizzazz and spiciness of onion and pepper without the aftertaste. Once thought of as an herb, arugula has become increasing popular as a salad, soup, or sandwich ingredient, or as a pasta pal.



Photographs by Carole Topalian, illustration by Helen Krayenhoff

BEST CHOICES IN SPRING PRODUCE

Artichoke • Asparagus • Avocado • Broccoli • Cabbage
Carrots • Cauliflower • Celery Root • Citrus • Fennel
Green Garlic • Greens (mustard, tatsoi, nettles, kale, arugula)
Kiwifruit • Leeks • Peas (edible pod and English) • Radish
Rhubarb • Spring Onions • Strawberries

Arugula, a relative of the radish, grows quickly, enjoys cool weather conditions, and offers up varying degrees of a peppery flavor, which mellows considerably when it's sautéed. It's an easy plant to grow in the garden or patio pot during early spring, when seeds quickly produce the deeply notched, irregularly shaped leaves that look a little like dandelion or turnip greens. Look for arugula sold in small bunches or set out in baskets at the markets.

Arugula, also known as rucola (Italian), roquette (French), or rocket (English) is much loved in Europe. Italians make a quick side salad by tossing it with olive oil and shaved Parmesan. The heat of the sauté pan mellows arugula's peppery taste, but don't hesitate to use it, as you would basil or parsley, to add green spike to a dish.

Prepare arugula leaves just before using. Trim off any roots and fibrous stems and be sure to wash leaves thoroughly, since they typically harbor a good amount of sand and soil.

Enjoy and see you at the markets!

Barbara Kobsar is a home economist who spends part of every week at East Bay farmers markets scoping out fresh produce. For almost 20 years she has been writing for newspapers, magazines, and newsletters on the subject of in-season produce. She has also authored two cookbooks focusing on traditional home-cooked meals using local produce. When not roaming the produce aisles she is behind her market stand selling the Cottage Kitchen jams and pepper jellies she makes from farmers market produce. Contact her at cotkitchen@aol.com



IS IT IN SEASON?

Take this little quiz to see if you are "Season Savvy." Answers are on page 45. (Our thanks to David Gans for providing these photos taken at East Bay farmers markets.)



Is it asparagus season?



Is it pepper season?



Is it blood orange season?