

The Most Nutritious Vegetables (published 02 08 2025)

By Earl Hockin, Master Gardner

Cool season gardening, both spring and fall, gives you the advantage of growing some of the most nutrient rich vegetables. The 15 most nutrient rich vegetables are all cool season vegetables. Many of them will survive in your garden through winter. You do not need a greenhouse. The most nutritious are very cold hardy and will usually survive over winter if you grow them under a low tunnel covered with polyester or polypropylene row cover, also called frost cloth. The cover comes in different weights. To protect plants from frost, enabling them to start growing 2 to 3 weeks earlier in the spring or later in the fall, use row covers with weight between 0.55 oz, per sq. yd. which give 2-4 degrees frost protection with 80% light admission or 0.9 oz which give 4-6 degrees frost protection with 70% light admission. When the temperature drops lower than 20F you can temporarily lay a sheet of plastic overtop of the row cover to add protection. However, on sunny days, warmer than 15F, you may need to remove the plastic during daytime so that it doesn't get too warm under the row cover.

Nutrient density ranking is based on the research done by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The availability of iron and vitamins was a major factor used to rank vegetables. The higher the nutrient density, the more the vegetable can help reduce the risk for chronic diseases such as cancer, diabetes, and heart disease. The most nutritious vegetable is watercress with a nutrient density score of 100. Watercress is a perennial in zones 6 or above. It can be grown in consistently moist soil which means it is possible to grow in containers. Fill the pot or bucket with a soilless mix. The best mix contains 1/2 coco coir or peat moss, 1/4 perlite or vermiculite and 1/4 coarse sand. Leave the top 3- or 4-inches empty. Put a saucer beneath the pot and be sure you keep the soil constantly moist. Sow the seed covered by about 1/4 inch of the mixture and keep the medium moist. Seeds will germinate at temperatures as low as 50F. There are different varieties of watercress. Winter cress is a biennial and Big Leaf cress is perennial. Once or twice during the growing season you may fertilize with a water-soluble fertilizer.

The second most nutritious vegetable is Chinese cabbage, aka Asian cabbage. The most popular Chinese cabbage is Napa cabbage, another is bok choy. They belong to the same genus, *Brassica*, as do western cabbage family including broccoli and cauliflower.

Chives are the fourteenth most nutritious. They are a perennial herb, very tasty for so many recipes and their flowers also attract many pollinators. It is also possible to grow chives indoors as microgreens.

The other highly nutritious vegetables are chard, beet greens, spinach, chicory, leaf lettuce, parsley, Romain lettuce, collard greens, turnip greens, mustard greens, endive, and kale. Many of these have varieties that are more cold tolerant than others. For example, cold tolerant varieties of spinach include Giant Winter, Olympia, Hammerhead, and Auroch. Cold hearty lettuce varieties include Arctic King, Winter Density, Rouge d'Hiver, and Black Seeded Simpson. The best varieties of Swiss chard are white-stemmed Fordhook Giant and Bright Lights. Some of the best varieties of kale are Red Russian, Winterbor, and Black Magic.

Resources

“How to Grow Watercress in Your Garden,” <https://extension.usu.edu/yardandgarden/research/watercress-in-the-garden>

“Floating Row Cover” <https://hort.extension.wisc.edu/articles/floating-row-cover/>

“Low Tunnels for Beginners,” <https://extension.wvu.edu/lawn-gardening-pests/gardening/gardening-101/low-tunnels-for-beginners>

“Defining Powerhouse Fruits and Vegetables: A Nutrient Density Approach,”

https://www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/2014/13_0390.htm

“Homemade Potting Mix,”

<https://sfyl.ifas.ufl.edu/lawn-and-garden/homemade-potting-mix/>

For more information about gardening, visit UTHORT’s YouTube site for helpful videos:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjS3d1IklH1OZ1Z2qPvhgfQ>

Or Washington County’s YouTube site: <https://www.youtube.com/@utextensionwashingtoncounty>

How do I ask a question?

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