If you are looking for foods that are high in vitamins and minerals, low in calories, and can be served raw or cooked, spinach is a great choice.

Spinach comes in two varieties: curly spinach, which requires cooking, and flat-leaf spinach, which is tender enough to be used in salads as well as cooking. Baby spinach is the choice of salad-lovers.

One cup of raw spinach has 7 calories, no fat, 24 mg of sodium, 56% of daily needed vitamin A, 5% of iron, and 14% of vitamin C. Calorie-for-calorie, spinach is a nutrient superstar.

Spinach is available year-round. The growing season in West Virginia is early spring until late fall. Spinach will grow on almost any well-drained, fertile soil having sufficient moisture.

Choose dark green spinach with a fresh smell and tender leaves. Remove any blemished leaves. Avoid any slimy or moldy leaves.

To wash fresh greens, place in pan of cold water. Remove stems or heavy ribs, place leaves in cold water, and let soak for a few minutes to loosen grit or dirt. Repeat the process two or three times and let drain or dry in a salad spinner.

To steam greens, cover them in a basket over boiling water for five minutes. You also can cook spinach in the microwave with a small amount of water in a covered container for approximately five minutes. Also, remember spinach reduces in volume when cooked, so two pounds will be two cups after being steamed or microwave prepared. Microwave and steaming best preserve the nutrients.

- Add spinach to your favorite salad or sandwich to increase nutrients.
- Use spinach in your next lasagna or stir-fry as a substitute for higher calorie foods.
- Steam and add sautéed garlic, onions, and a small amount of Parmesan cheese.
- Use spinach to wrap low-fat meat or cheese slices for healthier appetizers.

Spinach is best eaten fresh, but it can be stored up to three or four days. Wash, dry, and wrap leaves and store them in the vegetable bin of the refrigerator. If purchased, leave in package in the refrigerator.

Sources

Vegetable of week, www.extensionpurdue.edu/efs.

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