



## Growing Leeks

The leek is a member of the onion family, but easier to grow than the onion. Although the leek is tolerant of a wide range of soil types, they grow best on a moist, light soil that has been heavily manured from a previous crop. The ideal soil is high in organic matter and have a ph of around 7. Freshly manured soil is not suitable, because leeks grown in very rich soil will be coarse and tough and with far too much leaf growth. If the soil is in need of organic matter, it is best to dig in well rotted garden compost.

### Sowing Leeks

Leeks are hardy and can remain even through the severest winters. You can sow early from late January to early April under glass or in a seed bed outdoors to produce large plants for transplanting in April, which will be ready for harvesting from late August to the following May. The larger plants are easier to handle and give you longer stems.

Sow the leek seed about 1 inch apart, in a tray with seed compost, and mix in a little limestone or ground chalk. Or drills about 1/4 inch deep and cover the seeds with fine sifted soil. Firm the compost down and water if dry and cover the seed box with glass or a sheet of old newspaper. Germination should take about 14-21 days and will usually germinate easily in a cold frame or cold greenhouse.

Thinning should begin as soon as possible, when the plants are not more than thin green shoots, about six weeks from sowing. Thin the seedling to about 2 inches the first time as some of the plants may die, and then thin again when everything seems to be going well, so that the plants are about 4 inches apart.

### Planting out Leeks

By mid summer when the plants are about as thick as a pencil and 20 cm (8 in) high, they will be ready for transplanting to their permanent position. If you are able to plant during showery weather the young plants will settle more quickly, otherwise water the bed the day before if the soil is dry. To plant leeks in holes, use a thick dibber or trowel and make the holes 15 cm (6 in) deep and 15-23 cm (6-9 in) apart, depending on what size of leek you want. Make sure the holes are vertical and move the dibber about from side to side so that they are slightly larger at the top. The holes should be about 5 cm (2 in) in diameter. Cut back the roots until they are 2.5 cm (1 in) long and trim the tips of the leaves back slightly. Lower the young leeks gently into the holes and fill the holes with water. The water will wash enough soil over the base of the plant to allow it to become established. As you hoe the ground from time to time the holes will gradually fill up with soil.



Another way of growing leeks is to plant them 25 cm (10 in) apart in a trench. This method is particularly good if you have deep, fertile soil. The trench should be dug to a depth of about 30 cm (1 ft) and if there is going to be more than one trench they should be 75 cm (2 ft 6 in) apart. If you try to dig the trenches too close together, the walls are likely to collapse. Put in the bottom of the trenches about 7.5 cm (3 in) of well rotted garden compost and cover it with about 15 cm (6 in) of topsoil. Carefully plant the leeks so that they are absolutely upright in the bottom of the trenches, then water in as described above.

### Care of Leeks

Water the young plants well, especially in dry conditions, until they are well established. Soon after planting apply liquid manure. Hoe between the rows regularly to keep down the weeds and also this will aerate the soil. Frequent hoeing will also create a dust which helps conserve moisture. Leaves which grow too long can be trimmed back slightly so that they do not rest on the ground. Cut the long dark leaves back by about 5 cm (2 in) in early summer and again in mid summer, and a third time if it is necessary, in early autumn.



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### Blanching Leeks

Blanching leeks stops the sun from getting at the stalk which keeps the stalk white increasing the proportion of plant which is edible and improves the flavour which would otherwise be strong and harsh, it also gives the plant support. This is a gradual process and should be done in several stages rather than all at once, starting in mid august. There are several methods of blanching depending on which way the leeks are growing.



If you have your leeks growing in a trench, blanching consists of gradually filling in the trench with soil to the bottom of the lowest leaves each time until the plants have finished growing, which will probably be around mid to late autumn. This should give you at least 10-15 cm (4-6 ins) of blanched stems. The soil used for earthing-up must be dry and of a fine texture. If you use wet earth plant are liable to rot and if too coarse it will be difficult to handle and wont keep out the light properly.

If the leeks are grown on a flat surface, push the soil up around the plants increasing the soil depth by about 5 cm (2 in) each time. You can keep the stems free of soil by using collars, which are secured around the leeks up to the base of the leaves. Various materials can be used for the collar, lengths sawn from plastic piping, clay drain pipes or at virtually no cost, pieces of strong brown paper tied up with string or rubber bands. Whatever type of collar you decide on the minimum diameter should be 7.5 cm (3 in) and 30cm (12 in) long. Attach the collars before carrying out the earthing-up process. As the plants grow, draw up more and more soil with a hoe fitting another collar above the first one.

### Harvest Leeks

The leeks should be ready for harvest when the stem is approximately 1 inch (3cm) in diameter from mid autumn through to the end of late spring, depending on the time of sowing and the variety. The hardier varieties are left in the ground until they are needed. Never pull the leeks out of the ground by force or they will more than likely break in two. Instead, lever them out with a spade or a fork. Dig up the largest ones first, if you leave the smallest ones in the ground until the spring, they will put on some more weight before they flower.

If the ground is likely to be frozen for a long period of time, it is a good idea to lift any leeks which are ready and store them in some sand in a cool place, where they will keep for about a month. If by the end of the season you have a few leeks still left in the ground, but need to clear the plot, you can dig up the leeks and heel them in a shady place until they are needed. Lay them on their side in a shallow trench with the top part of the leaf stalk sticking out above the ground, covering the rest of the stalk with soil

