INGREDIENT OF THE MONTH

LEEKS

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Presented by ACFEF Chef & Child Foundation and Clemson University
Resembling giant scallions, leeks are a member of the onion family and share many attributes with its well-known cousin. They are comprised of two main parts: a bulb that grows underground and green leaves that protrude into the open air. Leeks have a crunchy texture and when cooked, they have a milder and more subtle flavor than an onion. They can easily stand up to rich flavors and are often used to enrich soups or stews and are paired with potatoes, cheeses and fish. Leeks are high in vitamins and minerals making them a nutritionally versatile vegetable.

Leeks have a history that stretches back to ancient Egypt. Leeks were also popular in ancient Greece and Rome and eventually stacked claim in modern Europe by being touted as “poor man’s asparagus.” Leeks are available year-round in most regions, but they’re best during early fall to the end of winter. They can survive the cold, wet winters in Great Britain, which contributed to their popularity in the area. In fact, an image of a leek is worn by many in Wales on Saint David’s Day, which takes place on March 1st of every year. This is in commemoration of the legend of a battle between Welsh and Saxon soldiers around the sixth century. The Welsh supposedly wore leeks on their helmets to distinguish themselves from their foes. Today, the leek is grown widely across North America, Europe and northern Asia.

Healthy ingredient contribution

**ANTIOXIDANTS:** Leeks contain antioxidant polyphenols. Polyphenols specifically protect blood vessels and blood cells from oxidative damage.

**FOLATE:** Leeks are a very good source of folate, which is a vitamin that supports the production of skin and red blood cells. It also aids in the functioning of the nervous system and helps to prevent bone deterioration.

**IRON:** Leeks are also a very good source of iron. Iron is a mineral that is part of hemoglobin and myoglobin in blood. It binds oxygen and aids in its transportation throughout the body. In addition, it serves a role in the body’s production of energy.

**MANGANESE:** Leeks provide manganese, a mineral that allows the body to better make use of other nutrients by activating enzymes. Thus, it helps maintain the functionality of parts of the skeletal, nervous, and endocrine systems.

**VITAMIN A:** Leeks are also an excellent source of vitamin A. Vitamin A is a fat-soluble vitamin that helps preserve eyesight. In addition, it also works with the immune system to protect the body.

**VITAMIN B6:** Leeks are a good source of vitamin B6. This vitamin is involved with many different enzymatic reactions in the body, as well as processing simple and complex carbohydrates.

**VITAMIN C:** Leeks are also a very good source of vitamin C, which serves many protective roles in the body, including the prevention of scurvy. Scurvy is a deficiency of vitamin C that leads to bleeding gums and skin discoloration. Vitamin C also serves as an antioxidant, which means that it works to protect cells from damage caused by free radicals.

**VITAMIN K:** Leeks are an excellent source of vitamin K, which is an anti-inflammatory that aids cardiovascular health and prevents bones from weakening.

Varieties and uses

Leeks are commonly divided by harvest seasons—summer and winter. There are three main groups of leeks—early season (also known as summer), mid season, and late season. Early season leeks are harvested in the season that they are planted and tend to be smaller with milder flavors. Mid and late season leeks are heartier plants that grow through the winter and are meant to be harvested in later seasons. These leeks grow larger and may have more pungent flavors, and they may also require blanching when used in the kitchen.

**Early season:**

**Varna** - These leeks are very small and tend to grow in clumps. They are often used in soups or as a garnish for salads due to their size.

**King Richard** - These leeks have long, skinny stems that are white for the entire summer. They are also often used in soups or salads.

**Mid season:**

**Splendid** - These leeks have thick stems and grow very quickly, but they do not form bulbs. Their size makes them ideal for grilling.

**Albinstar Baby** - These leeks are ready to harvest when their diameter is only ½ inch, but they can also be left in the ground to grow larger. Their use is largely dependent on the size at which they are harvested.

**Late season:**

**American Flag** - This leek grows 7-9 inches tall and has blue-green leaves. It has a mild flavor and is often used as a main component of salads.

**Giant Musselburgh** - These leeks have large white stalks topped by dark green leaves. They can grow from 9-15 inches tall and are often used in salads.
Storage
Fresh leeks should be stored unwashed and untrimmed in the refrigerator where they will keep fresh for up to 5 days.

Serving size
One cup chopped leeks= 50 calories, 0 grams fat, 2 grams dietary fiber, 30% of the recommended daily value or DV of vitamin A, 20% of the DV of vitamin C and 15% DV for iron.

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RECIPE

GRILLED LEEKS AND PORTABELLA QUINOA SALAD

Yield: 6 servings (serving size: 2/3 cup)

Ingredients:

1 cup quinoa
2 leeks, trimmed and cut in half lengthwise
2 large Portobello mushroom caps
2 tablespoons olive oil, divided
¼ teaspoon sea salt

¼ teaspoon freshly cracked black pepper
4 slices center-cut bacon, cooked and crumbled
2 cloves garlic, minced
1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice
1 teaspoon chopped fresh thyme

1) Cook quinoa according to package directions. Set aside in a large mixing bowl.

2) Place a griddle pan over a high heat. While it is heating up, put the leeks and mushrooms on a plate and drizzle with the 1 tablespoon olive oil and sprinkle with salt and pepper. Then place the leeks and mushrooms on to the hot griddle pan, turning them over after 2 minutes, until they have grill marks on both sides. Slice leeks and mushrooms and add to quinoa. Stir in remaining 1 tablespoon olive oil, bacon, garlic, lemon juice, and thyme. Serve warm.

Nutrition Information

| Calories: 250 | Sodium: 220mg | Vitamin A: 10% |
| Fat: 10g | Fiber: 9g | Vitamin C: 6% |
| Sat. Fat: 1.5g | Sugars: 3g | Calcium: 4% |
| Carbs: 31g | Protein: 9g | Iron: 15% |

Contributions for this article were made by Tim Foxworth and the following recipe was created and tested by Clemson University’s Culinary Nutrition Undergraduate Student Research Group.