**Summer Greens**

Summer greens could include hundreds of leafy green vegetables, but for Beneficial Bites purposes, we’re going to concentrate on just a few:

* Swiss Chard
* Collard Greens
* Spinach
* Kale
* Romaine
* And a few Lettuce varieties

We’ll share information about the health benefits, great ways to prepare and serve, and a few fun facts about each one. As always, this is interactive so if you have ideas to share, please do so.

**Swiss Chard**

Swiss chard is not native to Switzerland. It’s actual homeland lies further south in the Mediterranean where it remains one of the most popular vegetables.

* Ancient Greeks and later the Romans, honored chard for its medicinal properties.
* Aristotle, the Greek philosopher wrote about chard in the fourth century B.C.

Swiss chard belongs to the chenopod family of vegetables which includes beets, spinach and quinoa (Keen-wah).

* Chard has a thick, crunchy stalk with fan-like wide green leaves. Leaves may be smooth or curly, depending on variety.
* The stalk can be as much as 2 feet in length and comes in a variety of colors…white, red, yellow and orange. Sometimes, colors are bunched together and sold as “rainbow chard”.

It is one of only a few vegetables for which boiling is recommended. That’s because Swiss chard is high in oxalic acid, and boiling can reduce its concentration.

* You may recall that oxalic acid is the substance responsible for the bitter taste in rhubarb.

When purchasing chard, make sure it’s being held in a chilled display to help ensure a crunchier texture and sweeter taste.

* Leaves should be vivid green and not show signs of browning, yellowing or wilting, and nor should they have tiny holes.
* Stalks should look crisp and unblemished.
* Do not wash it before storing. Store in a plastic bag with as much of the air removed from the bag as possible. Keep in the refrigerator up to 5 days.
* If you have large batches, you can blanch the leaves and freeze.

Health benefits of Swiss chard are numerous, mostly because of the variety of antioxidants this vegetable contains. In fact, it is only second to spinach as one of the most nutrient rich vegetables!

As is often the case, the pigments found in fruits and vegetables are a source of beneficial substances. The vibrant greens, reds, purples and yellows in the leaves and stalks of chard are no different.

* Anti-inflammatory properties (reduce inflammation or reduce the risk of inflammation which can lead to many chronic health conditions)
* Antioxidants (help the body get rid of harmful substances that can cause damage to cells)
* Blood sugar benefits are numerous – chard contains ***syringic acid*** which has been shown in lab and animal studies to help blood sugars stay more steady by preventing some carbohydrates from breaking down into simple sugars.
	+ Chard also contains a good amount of fiber…almost 4 gms / 1 cup cooked. This fiber, along with a good amount of protein also helps to stabilize blood sugar levels.
	+ Animal studies are also showing that chard has a protective effect on the liver and can help pancreatic cells. This is exciting news and hopefully we will see larger scale studies in the future.
* Bone health - chard is also a source of calcium, magnesium and vitamin K, all of which are very important in keeping our bones healthy.
* Keep in mind that this excellent source of vitamin K, can be a problem for those persons who are taking certain blood thinners. If you aren’t sure, ask your pharmacist or doctor.

**Collard Greens**

Collard greens are descendents of wild cabbage and have been cultivated since the times of the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations. They may have been here longer, but the first mention of collard greens in the U.S. dates back to the late 17th century. Collards are considered an integral food in traditional southern U.S. cuisine.

Collards are a cruciferous vegetable and as mentioned, belong to the same family as cabbage, kale and broccoli. It actually shares the same botanical name as kale (Brassica oleracea) and some resemblance, but they still have their own distinctive qualities.

* Like kale, collards are non-head forming greens. They have dark blue-green leaves that are smooth in texture and relatively broad.
* Collard greens have a very mild, almost smoky flavor, quite different from their cousins, kale and mustard greens.

When purchasing collard greens, select those that have unwilted leaves that are vibrant deep green in color with no signs of yellowing or browning.

* Leaves that are smaller, will be more tender and have a milder flavor.
* The longer it is in storage, the more bitter the flavor.
* Store in plastic bag, removing as much air as possible, ideally less than 3-5 days.

There are a few safety concerns when eating collard greens.

* Collard greens are among the top 12 foods with pesticide residue. For this reason, it is often recommended that you grow your own or buy organic.
* While most people can enjoy regular consumption of collard greens, persons with existing and untreated kidney problems may need to avoid them. That’s because of the oxalates found in this vegetable.

While some people may refer to collard greens as “goitrogenic”, they do not cause goiter, nor do they harm the thyroid gland. It simply means that people who take medication for hypothyroidism, should not consume large quantities of raw collard greens…cooking and moderation are key.

Health benefits of collard greens are exceptional.

* Cholesterol lowering ability – collard greens help to bind bile acids during digestion. Bile acids are made from cholesterol so basically, collard greens help to remove cholesterol from the body! Important to note is that steamed collard greens show much greater ability to do this than raw collards.
* Heart health – substances found in collards help reduce unwanted inflammation, a major contributor to blood vessel and circulatory problems. Fiber, folate and omega 3 fatty acids also promote heart health and are found in collards.
* Cancer protection – Substances found in collards help reduce cancer development by supporting our body’s detox system and anti-inflammatory system. In addition, collards are a rich source of vitamin C, beta-carotene, vitamin E and manganese all important antioxidants!
* Vitamin K – As mentioned before, vitamin K is important in bone health but can present problems for those on certain blood thinners.
* Current research is underway to examine the benefits of collard greens in relationship to our risk of other inflammatory conditions such as Crohns disease, inflammatory bowel disease, insulin resistance, irritable bowel syndrome, metabolic syndrome, obesity, rheumatoid arthritis, type 2 diabetes and ulcerative colitis! Can’t wait to see what comes of these studies.

**Spinach**

Spinach is thought to have originated in ancient Persia (a.k.a. Iran) and made its way to China in the 7th century when the king of Nepal sent it as a gift. It wasn’t until the 11th century that it reached Spain. In fact, for awhile spinach was known as “the Spanish vegetable” in England.

Spinach was the favorite vegetable of Catherine de Medici, an historical figure in 16th century Europe. It is said that when she left her home of Florence, Italy to marry the king of France, she brought along her own cooks who could prepare spinach the ways she especially liked. Since this time, dishes with a bed of spinach are referred to as “a la Florentine.” If a dish contains spinach, you may just see the word “Florentine”.

It grows well in temperate climates and today, the U.S. and the Netherlands are among the largest commercial producers of spinach.

Spinach belongs to the same family as Swiss chard and beets…the chenopod family. It has a similar flavor profile, having the bitterness of beet greens and the slightly salty flavor of Swiss chard.

Popeye may have popularized spinach as a nutritious vegetable. Unfortunately, spinach out of a can was not particularly eye-appealing so it’s unlikely that kids or adults tried it because it “looked good.” Fresh spinach retains a more delicate flavor, texture and green color that is lost when processed. Cooked spinach has a more acidic and robust flavor.

There are three main types of spinach generally available.

* Savoy-crisp, creased, curly leaves w/springy texture.
* Smooth-leaf has flat, unwrinkled, spade shaped leaves
* Baby spinach is great for salads because of its delicate taste and texture.

Once again, choose spinach that has vibrant deep, green leaves and stems with no signs of yellowing. Leaves should appear fresh and tender, not wilted or bruised. Don’t wash before storing, and store in plastic bag with as much of the air removed as possible. Store up to 5 days. Avoid storing cooked spinach as it does not keep very well.

Like Collard Greens, Spinach has a couple of safety concerns.

* Spinach is also among the top 12 foods with pesticide residues. Growing your own or buying organic is generally recommended.
* Spinach also contains oxalates so those with untreated kidney problems may want to avoid eating spinach regularly.
* Spinach has naturally occurring substances called purines. Purines do not cause problems for most people. However, purines are broken down into uric acid and accumulation of uric acid is a problem for people with gout and a history of kidney stones. Spinach has not been shown to CAUSE these problem, but people who already have it, should avoid eating a lot of spinach.
* Yes, spinach is a rich source of vitamin K, and once again, people taking certain blood thinners need to avoid too much vitamin K. It’s important to understand that we still need vitamin K, but we just have to be consistent in the amount we eat to avoid problems. Vitamin K is necessary for bone health, and even though we take blood thinners, vitamin K is still needed to allow our blood to clot when injured. Be sure to talk to your doctor about how much is okay.

Health Benefits of Spinach…it is rated number one for nutrient richness!

* Anti-inflammatory which is good for heart health, arthritis and reducing the risk of other conditions.
* Overall cancer prevention, plus a recent study showed spinach provided significant protection against the occurrence of aggressive prostate cancer!! Stayed tuned for more on this.
* Lots of antioxidants which help the body get rid of harmful substances.
* Beta-carotene, lutein and zeaxanthin provide protection for our eyes.
* In addition to vitamin K, the calcium and magnesium in spinach helps our bones.
* Spinach is a good source of iron. Early studies suggested that the iron wasn’t absorbed because of the oxalates, but more recent studies indicate that the absorption is not really impacted. Guess Popeye knew more than dietitians back then!

**Kale**

Like broccoli and collard greens, Kale is a descendant of the wild cabbage. Generally thought to have arrived in Europe around 600 BC by Celtic wanderers, kale was a significant crop during ancient Roman times. It as also a popular vegetable eaten by peasants in the Middle Ages. Like collards, kale arrived in the U.S. in the 17th century by English settlers.

Kale is a leafy green that belongs to the Brassica family. This family of vegetables has received a lot of attention in recent years for the many health-promoting substances they contain…specifically, some of the sulfur-containing compounds.

There are several varieties of kale:

* Curly kale has ruffled leaves and a fibrous stalk. It is deep green, has a pungent flavor with somewhat bitter and peppery characteristic.
* Dinosaur kale, also called Tuscan or Lacinato kale, features more of dark blue-green leaves that have a somewhat embossed texture. It is sweeter and more delicate in flavor.
* Ornamental kale is a newer variety that is often referred to as salad savoy. Leaves can be green, white or purple and the stalks grow somewhat together to form a very loose head. It has a mellow flavor and tender texture.

When purchasing kale, look for firm, deep colored leaves with moist and hardy stems. Avoid leaves that are wilting, browning, yellowing, or have small holes. Smaller size leaves are generally more tender and milder in flavor. Store like you would other greens.

Safety concerns are the same…oxalates for people w/kidney problems; pesticide residue is high; people w/underactive thyroid avoid large quantities; and it is an excellent source of vitamin K so those on certain blood thinners should use caution.

Health benefits are many and varied.

* Kale also has cholesterol-lowering benefits by its ability to bind to bile acids during digestion, carrying cholesterol out of the body. Steamed kale improves this binding process.
* Kale is also an antioxidant powerhouse. One antioxidant is called ***quercitin***. You may recall ***quercitin*** is one of the beneficial substances found in apples and onions. Several studies are looking at quercetin and its beneficial effects against cataracts, heart disease and many types of cancer. And this is just one of over 45 beneficial compounds found in kale!
* Remember that antioxidants help the body get rid of harmful stuff too.
* Kale is a source of omega 3 fatty acids, which has been shown to have anti-inflammatory benefits.
* Kale is also an excellent source of vitamin C, A & manganese. It is a very good source of fiber, copper, calcium, B6 and potassium. And a good source of several other vitamins and minerals.

**Romaine Lettuce**

The Latin name for Romaine Lettuce is Lactuca sativa which is derived from the Latin word for milk. That’s because a milky white substance oozes from the leaf base and thicker ribs of older, larger leaves.

Romaine is the American term for this long leafed lettuce, also called Cos or Cos Lettuce (mainly with British-speaking peoples) because it is said to have originated on the Greek island of Cos. Its original home is western Europe and the eastern Mediterranean area.

* Romaine has been cultivated and eaten cooked or raw for almost 5,000 years and may very well be the oldest form of cultivated lettuce. Egyptian tombs reveal paintings of lettuce with long, pointed leaves, resembling romaine.
* It was known to the Romans, who usually ate lettuce cooked, as Cappadocian lettuce, and was called Roman lettuce due to the Romans belief in its healthful and healing properties.
* Romaine lettuce has also been called Manchester lettuce.

Romaine is a member of the daisy family Compositae. Although this is the second largest family of flowering plants, it only contributes a few food plants including chicory, endive, escarole and dandelion.

* Distinguished by it’s elongated head with dark green, narrow, crisp leaves.
* Leaves have a coarse texture with a thick rib that runs nearly the entire length.
* The tips of the outer leaves, can have a bitter taste. The interior leaves are paler and tend to be milder and sweeter in flavor.
* There is a red-tipped variety that has a milder flavor.

Health Benefits of Romaine Lettuce are mostly related to heart and blood vessels.

* Vitamin C and beta-carotene make it a heart healthy green. These substances are antioxidants that work together to reduce the harmful effects of bad cholesterol.
* Also, the fiber in Romaine binds with bile acids to remove cholesterol.
* Folic acid (folate) and potassium are also vital nutrients in keeping our hearts healthy.
* Romaine is also high in vitamin K, but much lower than the other summer greens we have discussed.
* It is a good source of several other vitamins and minerals that are involved in metabolism and bone health.
* Also a source of omega-3 fatty acids.

**Other Lettuces**

Generally speaking, the darker the green, the more vitamins and minerals. So it should be no surprise that Romaine is the most nutrient packed of the lettuces. That said, there are reasons to include other lettuce, if only for the flavor variety! There are two main types of heading varieties: crisphead and butterhead.

Crisphead – Iceberg lettuce is in this group and don’t disregard this valuable lettuce. Calorie for calorie, iceberg stacks up pretty well with the other lettuces. Plus, it lasts longer in the fridge, a bonus for small households. It’s high water content and the fact that water is a vital nutrient, makes it an important part of our diets.

Butterhead – Includes Bibb, Buttercrunch and White Boston lettuces. They have a distinct, delicate flavor with smooth, fragile leaves. The heads are not as tight as that of iceberg. Great source of several vitamins and minerals as well as fiber. Zeaxanthin and beta carotene are two antioxidants found in these lettuces and they are very important in eye health.

Endive/Escarole – Two main types of endive, the curled or curly and the Batavian or escarole. Probably the most difficult vegetable to grow because of a two step process. Crisp w/sweet and nutty flavor and pleasantly mild bitterness. Loaded w/antioxidants, vitamins, minerals and fiber.

***Is it pronounced en-dive or on-deev?*** You could say both pronunciations are right. The curly and Batavian endive are pronounced en-dive. Then there is another lettuce in the same family called Belgian endive that is pronounced on-deev.

Mustard greens – Though not extensively studied, but it is in the same family as collard greens/kale and is thought to have very similar health benefits . Often described as pungent and peppery, this summer green can be found fresh or canned.

Watercress – Another lettuce that is high in antioxidants as well as many B vitamins and minerals. It too, has a peppery flavor that can add zip to many dishes. It’s name is appropriate to it’s growing conditions…yes, it is a semi-aquatic growing lettuce!