

Leeks to choose when greens are lean

Leeks, so versatile in the kitchen, can be cropped right through winter, and some will last well into spring. **Sue Stickland** examines the best of the late performers in last year's RHS trial

i For more on the leek trial, visit: www.rhs.org.uk/trials and click through the links for 'plant trials' and 'plant trials search'

i Suppliers include:

- Seeds of Italy 0208 427 5020;
- Mr Fothergills 0845 3710518;
- DT Brown 0845 3710532;
- Thompson & Morgan 0844 2485383

LEEKS ARE AN UNDEMANDING, hardy vegetable, good not only for creamy soups, cheesy flans and savoury sauces, but also to steam, sauté or roast with other vegetables or on their own as a delicately flavoured side dish.

They are stalwarts of the autumn and winter vegetable plot, and tall, quick-growing cultivars can also be grown for pencil-sized baby leeks, to harvest from late summer and use like deliciously mild spring onions. At the end of the season, extra-hardy late cultivars can be harvested in April and May – when most fresh vegetables are scarce.

In 2008–2009, a trial at RHS Garden Wisley assessed 44 leek cultivars specifically for this late harvesting period. They included traditional hardy leeks such as 'Musselburgh' and 'Giant Winter', alongside Award of Garden Merit (AGM) winners from previous trials and newly introduced cultivars. Modern cultivars tend to have straighter stems and a longer blanch (length of white stem) than traditional ones, and many have erect foliage ('flags') – which allows free air flow and helps to reduce the risk of disease.

Trial results

Plants were assessed in November 2008 and January 2009, and finally in early April 2009. Cultivars that remained in the best condition – with healthy foliage, a good length of blanch, and no signs of bolting – were recommended for

an Award of Garden Merit. Some cultivars were damaged by the harsh winter and others had begun to bolt by early spring, showing how critical cultivar choice is for this harvest slot. Following the trial, leeks 'Bandit', 'Atlanta' and 'Edison' F₁ received AGMs; 'Atlanta', with 12cm (5in) of blanch and purple-tinged leaves, was particularly healthy. A further six entries (see box, right) were recommended for award, subject to availability and naming.

Cultivars 'Longbow', 'Apollo', 'Oarsman' and 'Toledo' had been given AGMs in previous years, and were still recommended by the RHS Vegetable Trials Assessment Panel for autumn leeks. They remained in good condition until December, but by April were past their best. 'Snowdon' had a similar autumn cropping period, and was noted as a good exhibition cultivar for its long length of blanch and well-shaped, solid stems.

Of the old favourites, 'Giant Winter' performed poorest. The three 'Musselburgh' entries from different seed companies were variable in appearance and behaviour, so gardeners choosing this widely available cultivar cannot be sure what they are getting.

Leeks can stay in the ground until you are ready for them, and can be harvested at any size. Autumn cultivars are at their best from September to December, but late cultivars will last into the following spring. The trial confirmed that leeks are not only an important autumn and winter vegetable but, if the right cultivars are chosen, they can also help to fill the spring 'hungry gap' when other home-grown crops are in short supply. ■

Sue Stickland is a garden writer with a special interest in vegetable growing

CULTIVATION OF LEEKS

- Choose an open spot where leeks have not been grown in the past three or four years to avoid disease build-up; prepare the ground with compost or well-rotted manure.
- Sow autumn and winter leeks from mid-March to April in seed beds, deep pots or modules; transplant in June–July. Early starting under cloches or in a glasshouse will allow plants time to grow larger. Sow baby leeks directly (2.5cm/1 in apart) from

- mid-March to June (they need 10–12 weeks to become large enough to eat).
- Transplant autumn and winter leeks deeply, so about two thirds of the plant is underground – increasing the length of blanch. Drop transplants from seedbeds into holes made with a dibber, and water in to settle the soil around the roots.
- For good yields of average-sized leeks space plants 15cm (6in) apart in rows

- 30cm (12in) apart. Wider spacing gives larger leeks; several seedlings planted in one hole will produce several slimmer leeks.
- Once established, leeks need little care, shrugging off most pests and diseases, but rust can affect foliage and leek moth is an increasing problem (see RHS Advice, p642). Applying a nitrogen-rich fertiliser in autumn helps winter growth, but this can be prone to frost damage.

A trial of leeks (*Allium porrum*) from seed was held at RHS Garden Wisley 2008–2009 specifically to rate which selections last the winter well. Some cultivars can stay in the ground until April or May

'Edison' was awarded an AGM in the RHS trial

LEEK TRIAL

In the trial, three late-to-crop cultivars received an Award of Garden Merit; six more were recommended for AGMs subject to availability and/or being named:

- 'Bandit' AGM: good, open-pollinated cultivar with 10cm (4in) of blanch
- 'Atlanta' AGM: open-pollinated cultivar; 12cm (4¾in) of blanch and purple-tinged leaves
- 'Edison' AGM: F₁ hybrid with erect flags, solid shanks and 11cm (4½in) of blanch
- 'Baikal': open-pollinated; tall, winter-hardy flags and firm shanks; 12cm (4¾in) of blanch. Not yet available
- 'Triton': F₁ hybrid; stands well for late-spring harvest; 11cm (4½in) of blanch. Not yet available
- 'TZ 02213': late-maturing hybrid; uniform crop with prostrate flags; 13cm (5in) of blanch. Not yet available
- 'TZ 7267': vigorous hybrid with tall flags; 12cm (4¾in) of blanch. Not yet available
- 'TZ 7270': hybrid; stood winter well; blanch 12cm (4¾in). Not yet available
- 'TZ 7271': tall, erect hybrid with solid, 13cm (5in) long blanch. Not yet available