

LEFT Chard frittata, prepared at Thyme cookery school in the Cotswolds. Chard is chopped prior to folding into the frittata. RIGHT Jacky harvests rhubarb chard 'Elite', rich in fibre, vitamins A and C; a tasty winter crop. BELOW LEFT Chard comes in a tantalising array of vibrant colours - red, pink, orange, yellow and white - which can be grown individually or as a mixture. OPPOSITE PAGE Colourful stems brighten up otherwise commonplace winter dishes.



Chard

A rainbow of ribs lights up the winter kitchen garden and jazzes up the dinner table like no other winter vegetable

PHOTOGRAPHS MICHELLE GARRETT WORDS JACKY HOBBS

Chard is famed for its brilliant ribs, which literally illuminate the garden in a range of intensely glowing reds, burgundy pinks, golds and whites. We are all familiar with chard 'Bright Lights' and rainbow chard's enticing assortment of shades, but individual colours are increasingly in vogue.

Tozer Seeds has isolated specific colours and developed additional show stoppers. 'Lipstick', in a really powerful pink, is my personal favourite, but 'Fantasia Orange' and 'Bright Yellow' are also stunning. These unique varieties complement the already fabulous and famed 'Rhubarb Chard', and the creamy white ribs of Swiss chard. They are equally as versatile. Plant them in the borders if you run out of space in your kitchen beds - they were originally introduced from Persia as decorative rather than edible plants. They grow quite large, so need plenty of room; about 20cm clearance should be fine.

Chard is from the same family as leaf beet and perpetual spinach, but bigger and bolder than both. Swiss chard, sometimes referred to as silver beet, has dark green foliage that is delicious, while ruby chard has pigmented red foliage, which adds another colourful dimension to cooking. Treat the leaves like spinach. The rib, which has fantastic novelty factor on a plate, can be removed and cooked much like asparagus. I love to serve them up together in a wonderful, wilted fusion of colour. ▶



Expert Advice

CLAUDIO LUPOLO FROM THYME FOOD SCHOOL ON GROWING CHARD:

- **Choose a sunny site**, to increase yield and maximise the decorative effect of chard in the winter sun.
- **Before sowing seed**, prepare the ground well. A neutral to alkaline soil is best, so add lime if acidic. Dig in plenty of organic matter, essential for providing nutrition and water retention for prolonged or successive crops. Add nitrogen-based liquid feed during the growing season. Water if wilting is evident.
- **Sow seeds successionaly** from spring to spring for year-round cropping. Late-summer sowing will deliver an invaluable winter crop. Sow directly into open ground, 2cm deep, 45cm apart.
- **Chard seeds germinate quickly**: new plants emerge 10-14 days after sowing. Thin to allow mature plants to develop sufficiently, but maximise the baby-leaf stage by only pulling when space demands. A rule of thumb is to remove the intermittent ones. Leave the remaining ones spaced 30-40cm apart.
- **Chard can be treated** as a cut-and-come-again crop. Young leaves can be picked after eight weeks, a bit longer for autumn sowings. Pick from the outside of the plant (new foliage is generated from the inside).
- **Prolong cropping** by protecting from harsh weather with a cloche or mini polytunnel, which also prevents pests nibbling at your leaves.



ABOVE Claudio Lupolo carries a freshly cut harvest of chard into Thyme Food School. BELOW Chard can be grown as a cut-and-come again crop or left to develop into a mature plant. BELOW LEFT Chard variety 'Bright Yellow'.

You can get two good successive winter crops out of chard, which should see you cheerfully through the gloomy months. Sow first in seed trays to plant out in early summer. Alternatively, wait until you are done with summer's glut of other vegetables, and have some space at the end of August to sow directly into the ground. Harvest these well into winter, while stocks last.

A quick, reliable and easy crop to cultivate, it gives you sweet young salad leaf pickings within a few weeks of sowing. Leave it to mature to enjoy substantial foliage, rich in fibre, Vitamin A and Vitamin C. Unsurprisingly, with all the energy required to produce year-long leaf, it is best to dig up plants after a year and refresh your plantings.

Chard is relatively trouble free, susceptible only to fungal infection or downy mildew caused by overcrowding. Hungry birds, mice and slugs can be bothersome, so protect accordingly, to prevent them from enjoying your supper.

In the kitchen, it is remarkably versatile, great for quick soups, frittatas, sides and warm winter salads; colourful, delicious and full of vitamins. Cut and cook as you need it. On a recent visit, Caryn Hibbert of Thyme at Southrop Food School shared her mother's delicious chard frittata recipe, using home-grown chard 'Good King Henry', a tasty white variety. The green or rainbow leaves can simply be sautéed alone, or I like them with tomatoes and served with butter, chilli and garlic. Whichever way you choose, the results are very tasty.



Suppliers & contacts

● For unusual varieties:

Tozer Seeds, Pyports, Downside Bridge Road, Cobham, Surrey KT11 3EH. To order seeds or to request a catalogue, tel: +44 (0)1932 862059 or visit www.tozerseeds.com

Nicky's Nursery, Fairfield Road, Broadstairs, Kent CT10 2JU. To order or to request a catalogue, tel: +44 (0)1843 600972 or visit www.nickys-nursery.co.uk

The Organic Gardening Catalogue, Riverdene Business Park, Molesey Road, Hersham, Surrey KT12 4RG. Tel: +44 (0)1932 253666. www.organiccatalogue.com

● For seed varieties:

Unwins at Elm House Nurseries, Alconbury Hill, Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire PE28 4H. Tel: +44 (0)1480 443395. www.unwins.co.uk

● For plug plants:

Thompson & Morgan, Ipswich, Suffolk IP8 3BU. Tel: 0844 2485383. www.thompson-morgan.com

● **Thyme at Southrop Food School** in the Cotswolds runs regular growing and cooking courses as well as demonstrations. Tel: +44 (0)1367 850174 or visit www.thymeatsouthrop.co.uk for details of monthly events.



Recipe

Swiss chard, sorrel & goats cheese frittata

Quick and easy to make, a frittata makes a delicious snack or simple supper. Team the chard with sorrel and goats cheese, or get creative and add other ingredients. Leave it to go cold and it's the perfect packed lunch.

Serves 6 people

Ingredients

For the frittata:

- 50g butter
- 2 tbsps olive oil
- 1 red onion, sliced
- 12 leaves of Swiss chard and stalks, washed
- 6 leaves of sorrel, washed
- 12 eggs
- 200ml milk
- 250g goats ricotta or soft goats cheese
- Finely grated zest of one lemon
- 2 cloves garlic, crushed
- A pinch of salt
- A frying pan that can be placed in the oven.

For the salmoriglio:

- Bunch of fresh oregano
- Juice of one lemon
- 1 small clove of garlic
- A good pinch of salt
- 100ml best olive oil
- Coarsely ground black pepper

For the frittata

- **Cut the chard leaves from their stalks**, and chop both stalks and leaves into 4cm strips.
- **Melt the oil and butter** over a gentle heat in a frying pan. Add the onions and allow to soften and turn translucent. Add the chard stalks and garlic. Sweat until soft, and then add the chard leaves, cooking until soft.
- **Beat together the eggs**, milk, salt and black pepper in a jug, and set aside.
- **Add the lemon zest** and chopped sorrel to the pan, stirring in before pouring in egg mixture.
- **Spoon in the ricotta** and place in the oven at 200°C for 10 minutes or until set/brown on top.

For the salmoriglio

- **Combine the oregano**, a garlic clove and salt in a pestle and mortar, mixing and crushing until you form a paste.
- **Add the lemon juice** and the olive oil.
- **Drizzle over** the cooked frittata.
- **Cut into slices** and serve. ♦

