

SILVERBEET

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THE VEGETABLE FILES

SILVERBEET

Silverbeet (also known as Swiss Chard) is the warrior of the garden plants. It's easy to grow, almost impossible to kill and if it goes to seed, you'll get hundreds of self-sown (free) seedlings to transplant. To harvest, cut off some of the bigger leaves at the base of the plant. Like magic it keeps growing more.

This is a fantastic plant to feed your family some green goodness, especially during the winter when there's nothing much else growing in the garden.

1. It's best to grow silverbeet from seed in a seed tray or small planter pots. Use your own seed raising mix or buy some. The seed only wants to be covered by soil as thick as itself, or it won't be able to push through.

2. Prep the bed. As a general rule, put a 2-4cm layer of compost over a bed before planting out. You can also throw a handful of compost into the hole when planting out.

3. When seedlings are 5-10cm high, plant out into your veggie garden. Leave 30cm between plants. Water and mulch the plants with some straw to help conserve moisture.

4. You can harvest leaves, young or old, by cutting them from the outer edges of the plant. Remember to leave three or four leaves as this will assist speedy continued growth.

5. As the season goes on, you can put a handful or two of compost around the silverbeet plants (commonly called side dressing) or water with a compost or vermicast tea. This will keep you in silverbeet all summer and through the autumn.

6. Sow some seeds from February to give yourself a winter crop. These warriors will keep growing all winter long, they might be slow, but they come away when the thermometer rises, fighting off Jack

Frost to keep on feeding you through the winter.

7. Using frost cloth/shade cloth on a hoop of some sort will create a micro climate and encourage superior growth through the winter

and spring months, especially when the temperature has high and

low extremes. It's these temperature extremes of cold and hot that stunt growth and send many plants to seed early!

8. As mentioned earlier, letting silverbeet go to seed is fantastic. Allow

these rogue seedlings to come up where they please. They are often the best grown plants.

9. If you get too many, cut back hard for young tender salads.

Depending on the time of year, you may get a second flush of growth. Otherwise allow the roots to break down in the soil, adding valuable organic matter.

10. If you've had enough of silverbeet, try growing some of the fantastic range of Asian greens available. They all have slightly different growing requirements. Tatsoi, pak choi, mizuna are my favourite three.

Recommended varieties to try: Beet Rainbow Lights looks stunning with its different coloured stems, Ford Hook Giant

