

Ricky's Gardening Tips and Tricks

and Home Horticulture

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Ricky's Gardening Tips and Tricks and Home Horticulture is an online newsletter designed to provide citizens of Allen County and northeastern Indiana with up-to-date information about Horticulture and home issues, written in a lighthearted style! To subscribe, send an email to kemeryr7@frontier.com.

Early Spring Vegetables

There are signs that this spring may start off warmer than usual – especially considering the last two springs have been cold and wet. It's frustrating when one has little time to put in early spring veggies. Hopefully this year will be different.

One of the earliest veggies to plant is spinach. Food historians believe that the very first spinach grew in Persia. From there, it moved east to Nepal. In the Middle Ages, those same peoples of Persia (present-day Iran) carried it to Sicily, where it adapted to the challenges of the Mediterranean climate.

By the Middle Ages, spinach was being grown throughout most of Europe but was unknown in France.

Catherine de Medicis was a duchess from Italy with noble ancestry who at the age of 14, married the Duc d'Orleans. In 1547, he would be named Henry II, King of France. It was Catherine's chef who introduced spinach to the French. Dishes served with a bed of spinach are labeled "à la Florentine" in her honor.

The trick to growing spinach is to emulate the climate where it does best.

Spinach prefers rich, well-drained soil. It can be planted about 4 to 6 weeks before the last frost in the spring

It can also be seeded 6 to 8 weeks before the first frost in the fall

Prepare the seedbed and scatter seeds on the soil. Some folks scatter the seed much earlier and the seed will germinate when conditions are optimal. When the seeds germinate, thin the plants 12 inches apart

Seeding early prevents spinach from bolting – or producing seed heads. When spinach bolts, it becomes bitter and the plant suffers because of the energy put into the flowers instead of foliage.



Cheesy Spinach Balls

3 Eggs (beaten) 6 tablespoons Butter (melted) ½ teaspoon Salt 1 ½ cups Seasoned Breadcrumbs

10 ounces Spinach (frozen chopped, thawed and drained well)

1 teaspoon Garlic Powder ½ tablespoon Black Pepper ¼ teaspoon Ground Thyme

1 cup Parmesan Cheese (grated) ½ Yellow Onion (diced very small)

1. Preheat your oven to 350 degrees. Grease a baking sheet and set aside.

2. Combine all of the ingredients in a large bowl.

3. Using a medium cookie scoop, make 1 inch balls. Place them on a baking sheet and bake for 30

minutes or until they are golden brown.

Leeks are another veggie that does quite well in cold temperatures.

Leeks likely originated and were cultivated in ancient Egyptian times. There are writings that state that services were paid in a barter like fashion with items like oxen, beer and leeks. Romans enjoyed leeks as a vegetable and also used them as medicine. They believed that leeks could cure everything from sore throats to nosebleeds. The emperor Nero was a lover of leeks. He ate so many he was often referred to as the leek eater. He believed they would improve his singing voice. Leeks were also popular in Ancient Greece, where they were used in various dishes, including soups and stews. During the Middle Ages, leeks were a staple food in Europe, where they were grown in monasteries and used by the common people as a substitute for onions, which were more expensive.

Eventually the leek made it north to Great Britain – probably brought by the romans. The climate of this region was especially good for growing leeks. There are several stories which link Wales with the leek. One of the most famous is that on the eve of battle with the Saxons, Wales's patron St, David advised the army to wear a leek to distinguish themselves from the enemy. This theme carried through to the Hundred Years War of the 13th and 14th centuries when Welsh archers were a key weapon in battle. With longbows as tall as a man, they would fire a storm of arrows to bring down the enemy...and would pop a leek in their caps to identify themselves. They also wore a green and white 'uniform' whilst in battle. When the Tudors, a Welsh family, originally took the throne of England, members of the Household Guard wore leeks on St David's Day and were given a bonus in their pay. There are also tales of leeks being given as rations to Welsh soldiers. Even today leeks are worn by every member of a Welsh regiment on St David's Day.

Leeks were brought to the New World by European settlers in the 1600s.

Leeks can survive a light frost, and mature plants can withstand heavy frosts. To get a jump on the growing season, you can start seeds indoors approximately 10 to 12 weeks prior to your projected last spring frost date. I prefer to gamble and plant leeks earlier, ready to cover them if a hard frost is eminent. Leeks decline in summer heat.

Leeks are shallow-rooted, so use caution when cultivating other plants near them. Keep the area weed-free to avoid competition. For gardeners with limited space, you can plant shallow-rooted, fast-growing salad greens in between your leeks while waiting for them to establish. I prefer to purchase leek transplants – they are much easier to grow and develop quickly compared to seed. Leeks prefer a lot of sunshine. At least six hours of direct sun on most days is ideal for them.

I grow leeks like the folks in Great Britain. As the plants develop and grow I begin to cover the base of the leeks with soil – continuing to do so all season. Covering the base with soil results in leeks with a large portion of white stems with some foliage. The Brits use compost to cover and side dress the row with composted manure. They can grow leeks that are huge – with stems inches in diameter. Leek and potato soup is a staple in British cooking.



Leek and Potato Soup British Version Tbsp butter 1 onion, chopped 3 large leeks, trimmed, sliced, thoroughly rinsed, and dried

2 russet potatoes, peeled and diced 3 1/2 cups chicken stock, or vegetable stock 1/2 cup frozen peas

salt and fresh cracked black pepper Melt the butter in a large soup pot and saute the onion, leeks, and potato for about 5 minutes, stirring often.

Add the stock to the pan and bring to a simmer. Cover, turn down the heat and simmer for about 15 minutes, or until everything is tender. Add the peas to the pot just long enough to defrost them. Working in 2 batches, process the soup until it reaches your desired consistency. It can be smooth, or chunky. Season to

taste with salt and pepper. Serve piping hot with a drizzle of sour cream and a sprinkle of chives. Some cooks add a can of Guinness to the soup for more rustic flavor.

Potato Everyone knows the story of the Irish potato famine that resulted in over a million deaths and also millions of Irish who fled to the United States as a result of the famine.

Conquistadors brought the potato back to Europe from South America – where potatoes grew wild on the slopes of the Andes mountains. These potatoes had blue and red flesh primarily. The issue with potatoes for the Europeans was that potatoes belonged to the nightshade family and were thought to be poisonous like other nightshade relatives. Potato arrived to Britain in 1585, Belgium and Germany in 1587, Austria in 1588, Ireland in 1589 and France in 1600. Sadly, local population of those countries looked at potato as absolutely unneeded, weird, poisonous (only roots of the plant were edible, which was totally unheard of in Europe), and in some cases as downright evil. For many years, potato was accused of causing leprosy, syphilis, early death, sterility, rampant sexuality, scrofula, narcosis and for destroying the soil where it grew. This sentiment receded from the Europe only after large scale efforts of France to find food that would sustain not only their military, but also population that was starved from continuous warfare. France was especially slow to adopt the spud. Into the fray stepped Antoine-Augustin Parmentier, the potato's Johnny Appleseed. Trained as a pharmacist, Parmentier served in the army during the Seven Years' War and was captured by the Prussians—five times. During his multiple prison stints he ate little but potatoes, a diet that kept him in good health. His surprise at this outcome led Parmentier to become a pioneering nutritional chemist after the war ended. In 1763; he devoted the rest of his life promoting potatoes to the French.

Parmentier's timing was good. After Louis XVI was crowned in 1775, he lifted price controls on grain. Bread prices shot up, sparking what became known as the Flour War: more than 300 civil disturbances in 82 towns. Parmentier tirelessly proclaimed that France would stop fighting over bread if only her citizens would eat potatoes. Meanwhile, he set up one publicity stunt after another: presenting an all-potato dinner to high-society guests (the story goes that Thomas Jefferson, one of the guests, was so delighted he introduced French fries to America); supposedly persuading the king and queen to wear potato blossoms; and planting 40 acres of potatoes at the edge of Paris, knowing that famished commoners would steal them. By the end of the 18th century, potatoes had become in much of Europe what they were in the Andes—a staple. Roughly 40 percent of the Irish ate no solid food other than potatoes; the figure was between 10 percent and 30 percent in the Netherlands, Belgium, Prussia and perhaps Poland. Routine famine almost disappeared in potato country, a 2,000-mile band that stretched from Ireland in the west to Russia's Ural Mountains in the east.

The United States was the last major country who adopted potato in their cuisine. For many years they regarded this crop for horses and other animals. Only after the 1872 efforts of famous horticulturist Luther Burbank, American potato industry managed to gain some traction. This was enabled by Burbank's discovery of disease resistant potato hybrid, and another hybrid that was used in Ireland to help combat blight epidemic.

Fish and chips is a traditional British dish consisting of fried fish and thinly sliced fried potatoes. The potatoes are called "French fries" in the U.S. and "chips" in the U.K. Many food historians think the first fish and chips shop was opened by Joseph Malin, a young Jewish immigrant, in London in the 1860s. His shop was so popular, it remained open until the 1970s.

Fish and Chips Recipe

- 4 large potatoes, peeled and cut into strips 1 cup all-purpose flour
1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1 teaspoon salt 1 teaspoon ground black pepper 1 cup milk 1 egg
1 quart vegetable oil for frying



- 1 ½ pounds cod fillets

Place sliced potatoes in a medium bowl and cover with cold water.

Mix flour, baking powder, salt, and pepper together in a separate medium bowl. Add milk and egg; stir until batter is smooth. Let stand for 20 minutes. Meanwhile, heat oil in a large pot or electric skillet to 350 degrees F (175 degrees C).

Drain and pat dry potatoes. Fry in hot oil until tender, about 5 minutes; drain on paper towels.

Dredge cod in batter, one piece at a time, and place in hot oil. Fry fish in batches until golden brown on all sides; drain on paper towels. Monitor oil temperature, increasing the heat as needed to maintain 350 degrees F (175 degrees C).

Fry potatoes again in hot oil until crisp, 1 to 2 minutes; drain on paper towels.

Growing Potatoes

One can purchase potato tubers from many online sources and catalogs. Isish Eyes is an online source that sells good quality unusual potato tubers. Nowadays, with organic potatoes appearing on grocery shelves, it is easy to pick up tubers of potatoes that have not been treated with anti-sprout chemicals.

Planting potatoes early takes advantage of the fact that potatoes do much better in cooler conditions. Depending on the weather, potatoes can be planted in late March or early to mid-April in our area.

I create a shallow trench in the garden and plant cut-up tubers—each containing an eye—in the bottom of the trench. I cover the potatoes with soil and wait for them to sprout. When the sprouts appear, then I continually cover those with soil for a week or so. I fertilize the plants with a side dress of rotted manure, or I spray the foliage with compost tea weekly. One always has to be ready to cover the plants to protect the foliage from hard frosts. Eventually in late spring or early summer, the foliage begins to brown. This is the cue to dig the potatoes. One can dig the potatoes earlier for the delicious smaller “new” potatoes.

Kale is another cold-weather crop for spring.

Kale is actually a descendent of wild cabbage, native to Europe and Asia Minor, and is recorded to have grown and been consumed for nearly 4,000 years. Of course kale does not have the same history everywhere. Kitchen gardens in Scotland are called “kale yards,” because so much kale is grown in them. Years ago during Halloween in Ireland, boys and girls would pull up kale stalks from the ground to predict their love life. In Japan, kale is dried and ground into a powder for green drinks. During World War II in England, because kale is such a resilient vegetable, citizens were encouraged to grow it in victory gardens.

In the British Isles some individuals hung kale over their door overnight, then placed it under their pillow the next to prompt prophetic dreams. Children who wanted a sibling could place a stalk of kale outside their parents’ door to nudge a sibling into being. Irish families in particular stuck charms into colcannon, a potato, cabbage, kale, and onion mash they served on Halloween. Whoever found a ring charm would marry within the year, while whoever found a thimble charm would be a spinster. A woman could also scoop the first and last spoonful into a stocking and hang it over her door—the first man to walk beneath it the following day was destined to be her husband. A uniquely hearty crop, it and its cousin cabbage were two of the few crops even the poorest residents of Ireland, Scotland, and Wales could reliably grow. In Scotland, kale was so ubiquitous that home gardens are still often called kaleyards. “Even the bells of St. Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh tolling at 2 p.m. were known as the kail bell.

In America kale was a virtually ignored vegetable until in the early 2010’s when the American Kale Association hired Oberon Sinclair, a public relations expert who’s worked with names like Hermès and Vivienne Westwood to bring kale to the masses. Nowadays kale is the superfood that will save us all. It is interesting to note that

many believe the American Kale Association does not actually exist – it was created to give the marketing some credibility. Don't act surprised – its been done before.

Growing Kale

Kale grows from seed to harvest in about three months. It is best planted in the late winter or early spring and may also be planted in the late summer for a fall-to-winter harvest. This biennial plant takes two years to complete its growth cycle—so it grows leaves in its first year, while seeds and flowers develop in its second growing season.

Kale is a fast-growing vegetable that does best in a planting location with full sun. Plant kale seeds about 1/2 inch deep, leaving at least 1 1/2 to 2 feet between each plant. High nitrogen content in the soil is important for kale to grow its leaves, so adding a few inches of organic matter like compost to a well-draining soil mixture will encourage a healthy harvest. Kale needs full sun to partial shade in most climates, as the fullest growth will occur when the plant gets six or more hours of direct sunlight on most days. However, if you live in a hot, dry climate, provide your plant with some shade, especially from the strong afternoon sun. Heat can make the leaves wilt and lose their flavor. Spring-planted kale will be good for harvesting throughout the summer months, but it's especially tasty after a light frost.

You can harvest young kale leaves to use fresh in salads or allow your plants to mature for use as a cooked green. Remove the older outer leaves and allow the center of the plant to continue producing. Kale will keep in the refrigerator, ideally in the crisper drawer, for about a week.



Kale Smoothie The kale smoothie for breakfast has been a staple with many folks interested in a healthy vitamin-rich and quick meal on the go. There are tons of recipes because honestly – a plain kale smoothie is less than tasty – in my humble opinion. In a way, its like the cough syrup I had to drink long ago. It tastes horrible- but you know it's good for you.

2 handfuls Kale 1/2 Avocado 1/2 Lime (juice only) add large handful Pineapple Chunks (frozen)

add Ginger (medium-sized chunk) 1 tablespoon Cashew Nuts 1 Banana (optional)

Directions

1. Put all of the ingredients into a bullet or smoothie maker, add a large splash of water and blitz. Add more water until you have the desired consistency. Pat yourself on the back for being such a “foodie” . Hand out the smoothies to visitors wearing an embroidered muslin dress – orange crocs, and a roaring twenties hat.

Poppies For Spring Planting

During the First World War, millions of soldiers saw the poppies in Flanders fields on the Western Front. Some even sent pressed poppies home in letters.

Over 100 years later, the poppy is still a world-recognized symbol of remembrance of the First World War, and millions of people choose to wear a red poppy in November. The war created prime conditions for poppies to flourish in Flanders and north-west France



(and Gallipoli). Continual bombardment disturbed the soil and brought the seeds to the surface. They were fertilized by nitrogen in the explosives and lime from the shattered rubble of the buildings.

Most poignantly, the blood and the bones of the millions of men, horses, donkeys, dogs and other animals richly fertilized the soil.

It all started with Lieutenant-Colonel John McCrae, a Canadian medical doctor. In May 1915 during the Second Battle of Ypres he was working in a dressing station alongside the Yprelee Canal.

On 2nd May his friend Lieutenant Alexis Helmer of the Canadian Field Artillery was blown to bits by an artillery bombardment. As many of Helmer's body parts as possible were somehow gathered and buried at Essex Farm Cemetery. At the funeral, McCrae stood in for the chaplain and took the service. Later that day when he came off duty, McCrae sat on the back of an ambulance and, looking over the fresh graves and the wild poppies, penned a poem "In Flanders Fields" which remains a living tribute to the men who died. The longer the war continued, the more men and animals died. The more men and animals died, the more the poppies thrived.

The poppy became the symbol of the war dead. It was seen as representing the souls of those who died between 1914 and 1918, transformed into a million blood-red flowers.

Papaver rhoeas, known variously as the Flanders poppy, corn poppy, red poppy and corn rose is a wonderful poppy to grow in early spring gardens. If you ever watch the British show *Escape to the Country* – a show about retirees buying properties out in the English countryside to escape city life – then often they show fields filled with thousands of red poppies in the spring. These are the same Flanders poppy that grow wild in Europe.

I always prepare a seedbed to plant red poppies in late March to mid-April – depending on the weather .

I use compost to create a raised bed – at least six inches in depth. I then scatter the poppy seed carefully as the seed is very small. Sometimes I mix the seed in damp fine sand so the seed is easier to scatter, not all in one place. After seeding I firm the soil with the flat of my hand- pressing down on the soil surface. I then lightly spritz the soil to moisten the soil. Usually after seeding I spritz the top layer daily . After the seed germinates I continue to spritz the soil lightly until the seedlings become well established.



Opium Poppy

The cool weather of spring plus spring rainfall are enough to keep the plants healthy. The reward is a riot of scarlet color in the landscape that sometimes can last a long time. Summer heat usually will cause the planting to fade away – until next year. Sometimes I add other poppy seeds to the mix- breadseed poppy even opium poppy are wonderful additions to add unusual beauty to the poppy planting. One has to promise not to use the opium poppy in an unlawful manner – and one shouldn't because it can be very dangerous to use them in a manner other than simply admiring their beauty.



Wandering Jew

Wandering Jew has a rich cultural history. It is a popular houseplant that is believed to have originated in South America. Its vibrant leaves and easy care requirements make it a favorite among plant enthusiasts.

The leaves of the Wandering Jew are elongated and have a distinct pattern of stripes that resemble the colors of a zebra, hence the species name *zebrinus*. These striped leaves add an element of visual interest and make this plant a standout in any indoor setting.

Another interesting characteristic of the Wandering Jew is its ease of propagation. It can be propagated through stem cuttings, which can easily root in water or moist soil. This makes it a great plant for beginners or anyone looking to expand their plant collection.

One of the reasons why the Wandering Jew is a popular houseplant is its low maintenance requirements. It can thrive in a variety of lighting conditions, from bright indirect light to lower light levels. Additionally, it only needs to be watered when the soil is dry to the touch, making it a forgiving plant for those who may forget to water occasionally.

Wandering Jew has cultural symbolism in different parts of the world. In some traditions, it is associated with abundance and prosperity, while in others it represents wandering or a nomadic lifestyle. This adds an intriguing layer of symbolism to the plant and makes it an interesting topic for discussion.

John Tradescant the Younger first brought the plant—native to Mexico—to England in the 17th century while documenting plants from the New World. It was called Tradescantia after Tradescant, and zebrina from the striped zebra, due to its striped leaves—which trail, or “wander,” from the main plant. The origins of the plant’s wandering Jew nickname is thought to have been derived in the 19th century, although the exact date and the intent behind the nickname are unclear. The expression “Wandering Jew” comes from a mythical Jewish figure who was cursed to roam the earth until the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. In more modern eras the term has also been used in less derogatory ways—by Jews and non-Jews alike—as a metaphor for the wandering of Jews in the desert and the perseverance and persistence of the diasporic culture.

The controversial name “wandering Jew” originates from the Christian myth of the Wandering Jew, condemned to wander the earth for taunting Jesus on the way to his crucifixion. The common name Wandering Jew seems to have gained popularity sometime in the 1950’s to the 1970’s. In recent years there have been efforts to stop using this and other potentially offensive common names, in favor of alternatives such as “wandering dude”..

Culturally, a lot of people are trying to move away from any name that could be offensive to any person.

Upcoming Aboite Library Gardening Seminar

Sustainable Gardening Free Seminar - Tuesday April 2 6:00 – 8:00 PM

With Ricky Kemery - Purdue (Allen County) Horticulture Extension Educator (retired)

Ricky will discuss innovative sustainable gardening techniques to attract pollinators, grow healthy vegetables and flowers with less maintenance and less “chemicals”. *Ricky will also give away two copies of his new book “Sensible Sustainability” at the end of the seminar*

Ricky’s Comment: I used to do these seminars every spring at various library branches. There has not been one offered since I left Extension. It will be great to do a seminar again.

Spring Soil Building

Now is the time to start thinking about building healthy soil for gardening beds in your landscape. Maybe you are planning on installing a few raised beds, starting a “truck” garden in the yard, or creating a bed to plants shrubs or trees.

For a conventional truck garden – here is the recipe.

For every ten by ten foot (100 square foot) area, add two bales of Canadian sphagnum peat moss, one bushel basket of rotted manure, one bushel basket of compost or worm castings, and two pounds of pelletized sulfur.

Till in the materials. You can get the sulfur in two pound bags at you garden center or hardware store.

The method does bring up weed seeds and does in the short term disturb earthworm activity and diminish the activity of soil microorganisms. It’s oK – life goes on.



I think **raised beds** are the way to go when growing vegetables and herbs.

Create a raised bed at least 3-4 feet in height and 3 feet in width by 8 feet in length by using or scrounging materials to make the beds out of lumber, bricks, pavers, even roofing materials.

Place newspaper on the bottom of the raised bed, followed by a piece of hardware cloth. At the bottom of the bed place small twigs and or twigs that have been charred in a campfire for example. Then build six inch layers of untreated grass clippings, shredded newspaper, rotted manure, compost, rotted leaves, and clean straw

fill in the top layer of eight inches with compost. You can plant the garden immediately, and over time one will have a raised bed with the best, cheapest soil possible. Each year top off the beds with rotted leaves and or compost.

One can use the same methods to create raised beds for landscape plants. This method is called sheet composting.

One can put a circle of rotted leaves about three to six inches in depth around trees and shrubs - leaving a six inch bare space around the base of the tree. Over time, one can place a thin layer of bark mulch over the leaves keeping that away from the base of the tree also. This is the cheapest way to fertilize a tree – providing it with organic matter in the form of leaf mold and compost tea to fertilize the tree. **Ricky’s Note:** I could not find one picture on the Internet that illustrated this perfectly- the picture to the right is the best I could do.





Hoggles – Demented Cat Logic

To my caregiver: I also like to cook to enhance my diet. Here is my most recent recipe.

Ingredient: Spam

Procedure Place spam in skillet – cook for 3 minutes.

Enjoy!! Oh I know I could have added a bunch of fancy ingredients to make “gourmet” Spam. But it is a little like dressing up a cat in a clown outfit – It’s still a cat in the end.....

An Indoor Lasagna Garden

This is my second year of teaching students about horticulture as an instructor for Beginning Horticulture Hort 101 at PFW. I really missed teaching and it is wonderful to work with younger students. They love hands-on activities, so this year we created a lasagna garden using a deep clear plastic tub obtained at Wal-Mart. My friend Gwendra drilled quarter-sized holes in the bottom of the tub for drainage. We put newspaper over the bottom of the tub, along with some hardware cloth to simulate a raised bed outdoors. The students added charred twigs, then six inch layers of grass clippings, shredded paper, worm castings, clean straw, and compost to fill the container. We then seeded it with lettuce and carrot seed. The seed germinated quickly, and the students will enjoy fresh organic lettuce and hopefully awesome carrots this semester. I think this would be a great class project for teachers to instruct students about sustainability, organic gardening, hugelculture, nutritious food, and the concepts of permaculture, biodynamics, and Amazonian Dark Earth – so much can be taught by integrating Stem Concepts – how to calculate volumes of soil, the Teachings of Sir Albert Howard- and the chemistry that occurs in the composting process. Any teacher is welcome to try this out – send me pictures and comments if you try this garden in your classroom.

Ricky’s Comment: The students put their own peel and stick stickers on the tub to make it their own... Cute....One can see the layers of materials inside the clear container.



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