



CHIVES

Jeanine M. Davis, Extension Horticultural Specialist

Chives (*Allium schoenoprasum* L.) belong to the same family as onions, leeks, and garlic. Although they are native to Asia and Eastern Europe, by the sixteenth century chives were common plants in herb gardens throughout Europe. Chives are hardy, draught tolerant, perennials, eight to twenty inches tall, that grow in clumps from underground bulbs. The leaves are round and hollow, similar to onions, but smaller in diameter. In June or July, chives produce large round flower heads consisting of purple to pink flowers.

Requirements

Chives grow best in full sun in a fairly rich, moist soil, which is high in organic matter, and has a pH of 6 to 8. Chives will, however, tolerate partial shade and most soil types. Chives should be fertilized several times during the growing season with a balanced commercial fertilizer or bone meal and manure. Although specific recommendations are not available for chives, a general recommendation is to incorporate 50 to 75 pounds each of nitrogen, phosphate, and potash per acre at planting. Sidedress with an additional 10 to 15 pounds of nitrogen two times during the growing season. Chives should be kept well watered and weeded.

Planting and Culture

Chive seed germinate easily, but slowly. Sow seed about ½ inch deep in flats containing a peat-based soilless mix.

Maintain constant moisture and a soil temperature of 60° to 70°F. In four to six weeks, the young plants can be planted outdoors, preferably after all danger of frost is past. Chives can also be direct seeded outside when the soil is warm, but then few if any leaves should be harvested that first year. Chives may be propagated by simply dividing large clumps into smaller clumps of about 5 bulbs each at any time during the growing season. All plantings should be divided every two to three years to prevent over-crowding. Space plants 4 to 15 inches apart in rows 20 or more inches apart, depending on the width of the cultivator that will be used. Chives are bothered by few disease or insect pests.

Harvesting

Leaves can be harvested after established plants are 6 inches tall. To harvest, simply cut the leaves 2 inches above the ground. Usually, in home gardens or small herb operations, all the leaves of a clump of plants are not cut off at one time. This allows that same clump of plants to be cut over and over again throughout the growing season. In larger operations where this approach is unpractical, the entire clump of plants is cut 2 inches above the ground, but then it takes several weeks before that clump can be recut again. The new growth, however, will be very tender. All plants should be cut regularly to encourage new bulbets to develop, to prevent leaves from becoming tough, and to prevent flower formation.

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Postharvest Handling

Freshly harvested leaves may be trimmed and sold in bunches tied with a rubber band; in small plastic, resealable bags; or in hard-plastic “clamshell” containers. Whole plants sold in 2 to 3 inch pots are also popular with consumers. Chives are most successfully dried with a freeze drier. They can be dried with a forced air drier but they tend to discolor and to quickly reabsorb moisture. Chives can also be frozen.

Uses

Chives are usually used fresh and are a common addition to baked potatoes, cream soups, and egg dishes. There is some evidence that chives can improve digestion and reduce high blood pressure. The oil has antibacterial properties.

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