

is also used in salads, soup, and cheese. Chives are also used to add a mild onion flavour to fish, salads, steamed vegetables, soups and omelettes.

### Acknowledgements

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# Chives

*Allium schoenoprasum*

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## BACKGROUND

### Origin and distribution

Chives (*Allium schoenoprasum* L.) belong to the same family as onions, leeks and garlic. Although chives are native to Asia and Eastern Europe, by the sixteenth century they were common plants in herb gardens throughout Europe. Chives are hardy, drought tolerant perennials 20 to 50 cm 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.

### Soil and climatic requirements

Chives thrive in well-drained soil, rich in organic matter, with a pH of 6 to 7 and full sun. They can be grown from seed and mature in summer, or early the following spring. Typically, chives need to be germinated at a temperature of 15°C to 20°C and kept moist. They can also be planted under a cloche or germinated indoors in cooler climates, then planted out later. After at least four weeks, the young shoots should be ready for transplant. Chives are also easily propagated by division. In cold regions, chives die back to the underground bulbs in winter, with the new leaves appearing in early spring.

Chives that start to look old can be cut back to about 2 to 5 cm. When harvesting, the needed number of stalks should be cut to the base. During the growing season, the plant will continually regrow leaves, allowing for a continuous harvest.

## CULTURAL PRACTICES

### Soil preparation

Thorough land preparation is important to obtain thorough kill of weeds and produce a suitable tilth for planting. The first working should be deep, with subsequent cultivations aimed at producing a moist, pliable tilth. If the soil is not very fertile, animal manure can be applied to the preceding crop. Do not apply organic animal products such as blood and bone meal immediately before planting because they attract the corn seed fly whose larvae will attack the planted cloves or germinating seed.

## Propagation

The easiest and most successful means of propagating chives is planting rooted clumps in spring, after frost danger has passed. Established plants usually need to be divided every 3 to 4 years. Division is best done in spring. Replant new clumps in soil enriched with organic matter, such as fine compost. Chives can also be started from seed.

## Planting

Chives can be grown as an annual or a perennial. Space plants 10 cm apart in rows 30 cm apart. Chives grow better if cut down to 10 cm in the summer. Adequate nitrogen is important and a preplant complete fertiliser or composted manure is recommended with additional nitrogen applications after the first harvest every year. Several cuttings can be obtained each year but the number of cuttings may be limited by rust disease as the season progresses. Chives may be grown as an indoor plant. Plant in pots filled with potting soil. Water and feed regularly to maintain growth. Make sure the plants receive plenty of light, especially during the winter months. They do well in cool weather but can survive almost any extreme temperature swings and can tolerate partial shade. Plant either seeds or divisions about 4 to 6 weeks before your average last frost date.

## Fertilisation

Overfertilisation can be detrimental to chives. Like many herbs, slower, more compact growth leads to stronger flavours and healthier plants. A soil rich in organic matter should provide sufficient nutrients. However, if the plant begins to weaken from continuous harvesting each year, a very light application of a 5-10-5 fertiliser may be needed once each spring to boost the plant's vigour. Use a liquid fertiliser at one half of the label-recommended strength every 4 to 6 weeks for chive plants grown outdoors in containers or indoors.

## Irrigation

When rain is infrequent, water deeply to make sure the soil does not dry out around the root zone. A light mulch of shredded leaves, compost, or grass clippings will help retain moisture.

## Weed control

Control weeds through regular cultivation but avoid root damage that slows down plant growth by damaging shallow roots. Mulches may also be used to control weeds. Weed control is particularly important during the first 2 months of growth when the plants are growing slowly and cannot compete with weeds.

## Pest and disease control

### *Thrips*

Thrips are tiny, slender insects that feed on leaves. Leaves turn

silver or grey, may twist and die off. Thrips hide near where the leaves and bulb join.

### *Control*

Spray with registered chemicals. Predatory mites can be used to control infestations.

### *Root maggots*

Root maggot is a white worm that feeds on seedlings, roots or bulbs.

### *Control*

Plant pest and disease resistant cultivars. Apply diazinon granules at planting.

## Disease control

### *Pink root*

Pink root is fungal disease that changes roots into a pink colour. Roots eventually die off and yields are severely reduced.

### *Control*

Use 5-year crop rotation. Soil solarisation where the chives will be planted can be done.

### *Downey mildew*

Downey mildew is a fungal disease that turns leaves into a light tan to brown colour. Furry growth, greyish violet in colour, may be visible on the surface of infected leaves during moist periods.

### *Control*

Cultural practices that facilitate air movement and drying of leaves will reduce disease severity. Registered fungicides may be used.

## Harvesting

Harvest chives by snipping off leaves from the base of the plant. Cut flower stalks off at the soil line once they finish blooming. This will prevent the plant from forming seed and keep it more productive. Chives are most flavourful when used fresh. Extra chives can be frozen by chopping up prewashed leaves into small pieces and freezing these in plastic containers. It is not necessary to thaw out pieces before using.

### *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. Fresh leaves are excellent for making herbal vinegars and butter. It