

Orach — *Atriplex hortensis* L.¹

James M. Stephens²

Orach is a member of the Chenopodiaceae family. It is also commonly known as mountain spinach, French spinach, and sea purslane. Some variations of the name are orache, arache, and orage. The name derives from the French “arroche,” a corruption of the Latin “aurago” (golden herb). It is sometimes called salt bush because of its tolerance of alkaline soils. Orach is a native of Europe and Siberia and is considered to be one of the oldest cultivated plants. It is grown as a substitute for spinach in Europe and in the northern plains of the United States. It is seldom seen in the tropics but is occasionally grown in gardens in Florida where it produces fairly well.

DESCRIPTION

Orach is an annual plant grown for its leaves, which are used like spinach. Leaves are arrow shaped, 4-5 inches long, 2-3 inches wide, slightly crimped, soft, and pliable. Stems are 5-6 feet high, angular, and furrowed. A rosette of leaves first develops, followed by a seed stalk that may reach up to 8 feet.

Flowers, which have no petals, are small and green or red. They occur in profusion at the top of the plant. Seeds are flat, russet-colored, and surrounded by a light yellow leafy membrane. The plant also produces some seeds that are black, membraneless, and often nonviable.

There are four common varieties of orach. White orach is most often grown. The leaves are very pale green, almost yellow. Dark red orach has dark-red stems and leaves.



Figure 1.

Green orach, also called Lee’s giant orach, is very vigorous, with a stout, angular, branching stem. The leaves are rounder, less toothed, and darker green than those of the white variety. The fourth is a copper-colored variety that is rarely grown.

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CULTURE

Orach is a cool season vegetable and should be grown much like garden spinach. It is quick to bolt in summer. In South and Central Florida, plant in October through January. From Orlando northward, plant seeds mid-September through February. Sow seeds ½- to 1-inch deep in rows spaced 2-feet apart. Thin seedlings to stand 6-12 inches in the row. Seedlings may be transplanted.

USE

Leaves and portions of tender attached stems are ready for harvest 40-60 days following seeding. Pick the leaves as they are wanted, and use as a cooking green.