

Tree spinach



In 2010, as part of our members' experiments scheme, members tried growing tree spinach to find out if it was a worthwhile crop. Here's what they thought.

Opinions on the value of tree spinach were mixed, but participants were pleased to have tried a new crop, even those who would never grow it again. We received 223 registrations – from individuals and groups – for this experiment, including 91 schools. Sadly, only 28% returned record sheets. If you take part in an experiment, please try to return your results; even if negative, they are still valuable.

Tree spinach seeds are tiny, so we advised sowing in trays or modules, which 98% of respondents did. Several people said seed size was a handling problem. Most sowings were in April, usually under cover, with the latest sowings in June. Sowing date had no obvious effect on final performance.

Seedling emergence was variable: 10% reported over 95% germination while 3% had none. On average, it took 12 days for the first seedling to appear, and an extended period of emergence was common. The seedlings, generally rather weak and spindly, were ready to transplant outside about 50 days after sowing. The few sowings made directly outdoors established successfully. Most people considered tree spinach easy to grow. Only 12% reported failure. The final height, ranging from 45-200cm, averaged 165cm. When grown in a polytunnel, the plants grew very large and tended to take over.

“A lovely new plant to grow.”

L Debenham, Devon

Generally pests and diseases were not a problem. The tall plants required support, and there were losses to wind damage, especially late in the year. There were suggestions that dried tree spinach stems might make good stakes for other plants. The crop was harvested mainly between July and September, although in some cases it was still going in December. On average the harvest period lasted 68 days.

Comments on the flavour of the leaves were mixed. Of



On trial: tree spinach* 'Magentaspreen' *Chenopodium giganteum*, also called purple goosefoot

those who liked tree spinach, most preferred the leaves cooked: steamed, often with butter, or included in stir-fries, curries, lasagne, omelettes and pancakes. Eaten raw, the leaves' magenta colour was appreciated, although the crystalline deposit on the leaves was not. Young leaves were much preferred to older leaves.

Our members' experiments scheme has been part funded by the Food For Life Partnership (FFLP).

The results

- ✓ Easy to grow. 55% would grow it again
- ✓ Not eaten by deer or rabbits
- ✓ Plants very ornamental
- ✓ Leaves pretty in salads
- ✓ Long season
- ✓ Cooked leaves “nutty”; scored 3.3 out of 5 for flavour
- ✓ Raw leaves scored 2.8 out of 5 for flavour
- ✗ Fiddly to pick and wash
- ✗ Colour fades on cooking
- ✗ Plants very large
- ✗ Raw leaves tough and strong

Seeds of tree spinach 'Magentaspreen' are available from chilternseeds.co.uk.

*Not to be confused with Mexican tree spinach or chaya *Cnidoscolus aconitifolius*, which is a poisonous leafy perennial shrub.