

**Seasonal Eating**  
**Whitney Danhof, Extension Agent**

**Spring Spinach**  
**March 2017**

Popeye had the right idea when he ate his spinach. Spinach is loaded with vitamin A, Vitamin K, Vitamin C and Folate and it's a good source of iron, magnesium and potassium. But not only is it good for you but it's just plain good!

A cool season green, we'll start seeing fresh spinach soon here in middle Tennessee. Fresh spinach is great in salads and pairs well with winter and spring fruits like oranges, apple slices or strawberries or roasted vegetables like butternut squash or beets. Add some cheese crumbles of blue, goat or feta and some toasted nuts for a memorable luncheon or side salad. Spinach is also a good base for warm dressings that slightly wilt the leaves. Try heating a balsamic vinaigrette to drizzle over spinach and mushrooms. I also like to add raw spinach to my sub sandwiches for extra flavor and nutrition.



Fresh spinach can be quick sautéed for a good side with a little garlic and olive oil. A pan full of fresh spinach will cook down to a just a handful. And this is why frozen spinach is such a great convenience product for many dishes. It is already cooked down so all you have to do is thaw and squeeze out the liquid. Thawed and drained spinach is great in quiches and frittatas, added to stuffings for mushrooms or tomatoes, stirred into cracker or vegetable dips, added to soups or layered into lasagna.

Florentine is the term commonly used to describe dishes with spinach like chicken Florentine or eggs Florentine. Technically it means in the style of Florence, Italy - usually a protein like chicken, eggs or fish with a base of butter simmered spinach and a Mornay sauce (Gruyere cheese sauce) over the top but has come to refer to any dish with spinach.

So this weekend I made Spinach Stuffed Shells. Pasta and spinach go so well together and while this looks like a fancy dish, it isn't that hard to make. While you boil the shells, you just mix together the filling and then pop open a jar of your favorite marinara sauce. Boil your shells just until they get tender (the package says 9 minutes but mine took more like 14). I used a shredded mixture of Italian cheeses but you could also just use mozzarella.

So take advantage of the frozen spinach until the fresh comes in this spring and add some nutrition and flavor to your favorite dishes.

For more recipes and information about seasonal eating, visit the Bedford County Extension website ([bedford.tennessee.edu](http://bedford.tennessee.edu)).

## **Spinach Stuffed Shells**

24 jumbo pasta shells  
1 1/4 cups ricotta cheese  
1 1/4 cups cottage cheese  
1/2 cup grated Parmesan cheese  
2 cups shredded Italian blend cheese, divided  
12 ounces frozen chopped spinach, thawed and drained well  
1 egg  
1 teaspoon Italian seasoning  
1/8 teaspoon ground nutmeg  
1 teaspoon salt  
1/4 teaspoon black pepper  
1 jar marinara sauce

Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Add shells and cook for about 14 minutes, until just barely tender. Remove to a baking sheet to cool. Meanwhile, stir together, ricotta, cottage, Parmesan and 1 cup of Italian blend cheeses. Add the spinach, egg, Italian seasoning, nutmeg, salt and pepper. Pour about 1/4 cup of the marinara sauce in the bottom of a 9"x13" baking dish. Place a spoonful of filling mixture into each of the pasta shells and place open side up on top of the marinara in the dish. Pour the remaining marinara over the top and sprinkle with the remaining cup of Italian blend cheese. Cover with foil and bake at 350 degrees for about 45 minutes to an hour, until bubbly and heated through.