

## **PENNY SAVER NEWS**

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### Nutrition in Bagged Spinach

Some people might look at this title and ask “Is there any nutrition left?” Others will dig through the stack of bags to get to those furthest in the back. Some might refuse to eat any of them, after the E. coli illnesses from bagged spinach several years ago. And then there are those who love the convenience and plop bagged salads in the grocery cart on a regular basis. Which group are you in?

This question came up when some USDA reports came across my desk. It turns out that they’ve actually been doing research on the nutritional value of bagged greens. Specifically they were looking at whether sitting in those clear plastic bags under the bright lights in the grocery store had any effect on the nutritional value. After all, USDA is the agency that creates the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, telling us what they think we should be eating. Is it worth eating bagged greens, or do we have to do the washing and chopping ourselves?

Should we choose bags from the front or the back of the shelf? Probably the bags at the back, in the dark, protected from light would be better, right? We know that vitamin C keels over and breaks down when exposed to a lot of light. But they were not sure. So they decided to find out.

To be really careful that they were comparing equal things (no apples vs oranges), they actually grew the spinach, washed and bagged it, and stored some of it in the dark and some under bright lights. Then they started measuring vitamins.

Surprise! The bags in the light had more vitamin C! Not a whole lot more C, but a little. They had more vitamin E, K, lots more folate and made more vitamin A too! What was going on? The answer is that whole leafy greens like spinach, kale, parsley and mesclun or mixed gourmet greens are still alive. They’re still making vitamins, as well as energy. In the dark they can’t make as much, but out in the light they’re pumping away. Chopped lettuce is not likely to be making much of anything, since those leaves are so sliced and diced.

But spinach in the bags exposed to the light had more of the good stuff for us. Folate for example is necessary for brain and nervous system functioning. Spinach in the light had almost 10 times as much folate as spinach from the dark. Spinach kept making the dark green and orange

compounds called carotenoids. Some of those we turn into vitamin A. Some keep our eyes healthy. Vitamin E is known to be an important antioxidant to keep the systems running well. Vitamin K is necessary for our blood to clot if we get injured or need surgery. Keeping the fresh whole leaves in the light left the veggies keep on producing. Kale, parsley, any of the leaves that are still mostly whole in the bags will still be making vitamins.

There were measurable differences even after just one day in the bright lights. When the leaves started to wilt then production slowed down. By 3 days some of the leaves were wilting, by 9 days they were pretty much gone. But every bag of greens in the store has a Use By date on it, and you're not likely to find bags that old.

It is very important to look for bags whose leaves are not seriously squashed or bruised. If the leaves are all ready looking wilted or damaged, find another. And if you're buying for tomorrow or the next day, read the Use By date. Don't use salad greens after that date. If they're that old bacteria may be growing in there too.

Here's a simple salad to make use of some nice, nutritious spinach. For the holidays sprinkle some dried cranberries on for extra color. And you can make the dressing several days early and keep it refrigerated until dinner. Enjoy the holidays!

#### Simple Spinach and Egg Salad

1 pound bag fresh, triple-washed spinach	6 hard-cooked eggs, peeled and diced
½ cup olive or vegetable oil	¼ cup sugar, or sweetener equivalent
2 Tbsp vinegar	1 tsp grated onion
¼ tsp dry mustard	6 slices turkey bacon, crisp-cooked
½ cup dried cranberries, optional	

Whisk oil, sugar or sweetener, vinegar, mustard and onion in mixing bowl until sugar dissolves and dressing is thick and syrupy. (If using sweetener it won't get thick.) Tear spinach into bite-sized pieces and put in salad bowl. Crumble bacon. Add bacon and diced eggs to spinach. Pour dressing over salad and refrigerate 30 minutes. Toss salad to coat greens. Sprinkle cranberries over salad before serving. Serves 6.

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