

8 Must-Have Veggies for Building Muscle

By EMMA ANDREWS

Often the unsung heroes on your plate, these eight muscle-building veggies are truly must-haves in every athlete's kitchen. Adding them to your diet will help maximize your energy mid-workout, reduce recovery time post-workout, achieve strength gains and improve body composition.

1. Peas: BCAAs and Glutamine

Why: Split peas offer not only a source of easily digested plant protein, but also contain specific muscle-building amino acids (especially branched chain amino acids and glutamine) that stimulate protein synthesis post-workout.

How: Recover post-workout with a plant-based protein powder that uses a multisource blend, including pea protein, [such as Vega Sport Performance Protein](#), which has five grams of BCAAs. Or add split peas to a homemade chili, stir-fry or stew.



2. Beets and Beet Greens: Dietary Nitrates and Antioxidants

Why: In conditions of low oxygen availability (such as intense exercise), dietary nitrates in beets are converted to nitric oxide, which enhances vascular function. This helps improve your tolerance to strenuous exercise and can help you train harder for greater strength gains. Beet greens are also rich in vitamins A and C, both powerful antioxidants.

How: Use grated beets as a hearty salad garnish, or try adding between a quarter-cup and a half-cup of diced raw beets to a smoothie. Beets pair well with chocolate protein powders and frozen berries. Try it (along with the beet greens!) in this [Whole Beet Smoothie](#).

3. Spinach: Arginine

Why: While we might not think of leafy greens as a rich source of protein, spinach is a good source of the amino acid arginine, which stimulates the pituitary gland to produce and secrete human-growth hormone, which in turn increases metabolism.

How: Create a meal with 25 grams of complete protein by lightly sauteing in coconut oil one cup each of cooked grains (such as quinoa or brown rice), cooked legumes (such as lentils or black beans) and fresh spinach. Toss in your favorite herbs or spices to season. Serve in a bowl with sliced avocado or olives to garnish.

4. Chlorella: Chlorella Growth Factor (CGF)

Why: Grown in pristine freshwater ponds on Japanese coral islands, [chlorella](#) is a dark-green microalgae. Unique to chlorella is a compound called chlorella growth factor (CGF), which contains amino acids, vitamins and nucleic acids benefitting cellular regeneration. Chlorella also contains all essential amino acids, making it a complete protein.

How: Easily disguise it in blended smoothies (add up to one teaspoon) or try it in this [Matcha Green Tea lemonade](#) for a hydrating and energizing boost.

5. Spirulina: Amino Acids Used in Metabolism

Why: Spirulina is blue-green algae that contains amino acids (including arginine) and is a source of vitamin B6, required for the metabolism of carbs, proteins and fats. Additionally, B6 is used in

converting amino acids into useable forms by the body. It's a valuable nutrient for any athlete with a higher-protein diet.

How: Rotate in your diet alongside chlorella, using either sea vegetable interchangeably.

6. Microgreens and Sprouts: Anti-inflammatory Phytonutrients

Why: Rich in enzymes that support digestion, sprouts are especially helpful for absorbing amino acids from protein in your diet. Additionally, sprouts contain many phytonutrients benefiting muscle recovery, such as sulforaphane and glucoraphanin, found in broccoli sprouts, which have antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties.

How: Add sprouts to wraps, sandwiches and burgers.

7. Parsley, Chives and Leeks: Lysine

Why: Herbs such as parsley, chives and leeks not only add flavor in your meals, they also boost the amount of lysine in your diet. Lysine is an amino acid that helps support the growth of connective tissues found in your tendons and cartilage. This helps your joints recover well from heavy lifting or high-impact workouts.

How: Garnish your meals with diced parsley or chives, and add leeks to sauteed vegetable dishes.

8. Barley and Wheat Grass: Carotenoids and Minerals

Why: These edible grasses contain mixed carotenoids (powerful antioxidants), which reduce cellular aging and keep your tissues looking healthy. They also both contain the minerals iron, calcium and magnesium, which play a crucial role in muscle function as well as the ability of your blood to carry oxygen to working muscles. This benefits your stamina mid-workout for improved strength gains.

How: Try boosting your smoothies with a shot of fresh, frozen or dried wheat grass or barley grass juice.

Incorporating these foods doesn't have to be intimidating. Many can be combined in one meal to be efficient, such as in a salad, smoothie or wrap. Aim to include each food throughout the week, having at least one food from this list daily.