



Summer SALADS



Now that the weather is warmer, what could be better than a delicious plate of fresh salad? Here, we show you how to go about growing your own. *By Gillian Carson*

Summer just wouldn't be the same without a lovely fresh salad, and for the very best ingredients possible – ones that have travelled virtually zero food miles – you absolutely have to grow your own.

Creating your own salad garden is so easy, and just imagine how convenient it would be to be able to pop outside of a morning and collect a basket full of leaves, radishes and spring onions – all of which taste much more organic than the ones you'd get from a supermarket.

There are so many different types of lettuce and salad leaves that you could rustle up a completely different salad every day if you wanted to. Choose from decorative hearting lettuces to spicy coloured leaves and peppery herbs. Not to mention the plethora of accompaniments, such as two-tone radishes, red spring onions, spicy rocket and blood-red beetroot leaves. All of them will give your summer salads that extra swagger – and they're so healthy, too!

LETTUCE TYPES

Broadly speaking, there are two types of lettuce – headed and loose leaf (or non-hearting) lettuce. The headed types grow from one seedling to form a tight head. There are three types of headed lettuce: butterhead lettuce has softer leaves but they're formed into good, firm hearts; crispheads are larger, with crisper, wrinkled leaves; Cos lettuces are more upright with thicker but crisp leaves. Non-hearting types usually form a larger rosette of leaves and each leaf can be picked as required. Salad bowl is a popular variety of non-hearting lettuce.

HOW TO GROW

Lettuces like light, moisture-retentive, non-acidic soils. Sow direct in the garden between May and August, or in seed trays or modules for transplanting. They germinate well at low temperatures, which is great in early spring but can be a problem now, at the height of summer. But don't worry – you can get around this by sowing them in modules in a cooler part of the >



Quick Tip
 Sow lettuce seed successionally for a constant supply.



garden, then transplanting them to the open ground. Sow the seed about three-quarters of an inch deep and once the seedlings are big enough to handle, thin them out to 15cm/6in between plants for small Cos lettuces and to 30cm/12in apart for larger lettuces. In smaller gardens, you can plant them a bit closer together but the resulting lettuces will be smaller. The secret to good lettuces is to always keep them well watered. When transplanting the seedlings from modules or seed trays into their final growing position, always handle them very carefully. Hold them by the leaf and take care not to bruise the leaf or stem, as disease can creep in. Also, keep new seedlings well watered until they're established, and try not to transplant them in full sun.

SUCCESSIONAL SOWING

Lettuces tend to grow pretty quickly. Loose-leaf types can be ready 6-8 weeks after sowing the seeds, while hearting types will take around 8-14 weeks. So in order to keep your kitchen shelves well stocked with delicious salad crops, you need to sow them successionally. This basically means that you need to keep sowing a small pinch of seeds at two-week intervals throughout the summer months.

OTHER SALADS TO TRY

Cut and come lettuce

A plentiful crop – as the name suggests, these just keep coming! The more you cut them, the more they grow. If you sowed enough of this type, you could have salad for lunch and dinner all summer long. A real must.

Spinach

The small-leaf version of spinach (the stuff you buy in the shops) is sometimes called New Zealand spinach on seed packets. Sow in groups and pick in single leaves to add to salads.

Rocket

Home-grown rocket can be very peppery, so you only need a small patch of this unless you absolutely love it.

Beetroot leaf

As the name suggests, this is the leaf of the beetroot plant. Pick the leaves when they're small and succulent – and yes, they really do taste of beetroot!

Mizuna and Mibuna

Visually, these are very similar and are often grouped together. They're the spiky leaves that you sometimes get in bags of salad from the supermarket. They have a subtle flavour and make the garden and your salads look more interesting.

Lamb's lettuce

Sometimes called corn salad, this plant produces clutches of soft, rounded leaves that, apparently, have three times as much vitamin C as your average lettuce.

Mustard leaves

Mustard greens are very easy to grow and will lend a subtle, peppery kick to any salad bowl. A real gem in the kitchen garden.



BEST VARIETIES TO GROW

The choice of lettuce varieties is mind-boggling. There are so many to choose from that it's purely a matter of taste which one is for you. The best thing to do is try a few and see which types you like. However, here are a few tried-and-tested varieties that seem to be popular every year:

- Crisphead types: Mini Green
- Butterhead types: Tom Thumb, Merveille de Quatre Saisons
- Cos types: Parris Island, Lobjoits Green
- Loose-leaf types: Salad Bowl, Red Oak Leaf
- Winter lettuce: Arctic King, Winter Density, Winter Gem
- Radish: Scarlet Globe, Sparkler



Radish

It's best to sow radish seed in its final growing position as, like most root crops, they resent disturbance. They can fall prey to flea beetles, which eat tiny holes in their leaves in mid-summer. But if the crop is grown quickly, this shouldn't affect the bulb.

Spring onions

Sow once, harvest all summer. Try red spring onions to add interest. They taste exactly the same as regular spring onions but jazz things up a bit.

WHAT MIGHT GO WRONG?

If you grow your lettuces in good soil and give them plenty of sun and water, the quickly maturing plants will be in a good position to resist most pests and diseases. However, watch out for these:

Aphids

Symptom: Tiny green insects on the leaves.

Solution: Blast them off with a hosepipe, or spray with a mild washing-up liquid and water solution.

Cutworms

Symptom: The leaves will be severed from the stems.

Solution: Hoe the soil around the plant and destroy any caterpillars that you see.

Root aphids

Symptom: Lettuce growth is stunted and greyish-coloured aphids are seen on the roots.

Solution: Pull up and destroy affected plants.

Grey mould

Symptom: Plants wilt and may break off at soil level.

Solution: Destroy diseased plants.

THE DREADED SLUG

When you plant a lettuce seedling, you can almost hear the slugs sharpening their teeth! The lettuce is one of their favourite foods – which means you have to protect them. Assuming you don't want to use chemicals on edible crops, try the following slug-depletion methods. But even with the threat of slug damage, lettuce and salad crops are still one of the easiest crops to grow.

Beer jars

Fill a jar with beer (the more ale, the better) and sink the jar into the ground until the rim is at soil level. The slugs will slide in, in search of a yeasty treat, and promptly drown in the beer. The downside is that you'll have to empty the jars at some point. Eww!

Crunchy surroundings

Slugs don't like moving over uneven ground, so put down anything spiky that will deter them from your plants. Crushed-up eggshells are a good option and coffee grounds can work, too.

WHERE TO BUY LETTUCE SEED

Real Seed Co • www.realseeds.co.uk

Nicky's Nursery • www.nickys-nursery.co.uk

Seeds of Italy • www.seedsofitaly.com ●

“Lettuce is one of the easiest crops to grow in your garden.”

