

## **Lettuce**

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*Not long ago the salad that accompanied the typical barbecue was composed of a few torn lettuce leaves, a scattering of tomato wedges and the odd slice of cucumber. Our tastes may have become more cosmopolitan and our choice of salad greens more diverse, but take a peek into most refrigerator crispers this summer and you are almost assured of finding a lettuce.*



### **FACT FILE**

**Botanical Name:** *Lactuca sativa*

**Family:** Asteraceae

**Climatic Range:** *Daytime temperatures below 20 degrees Celsius provide optimum growth conditions for lettuce. Temperatures above this can cause plants to quickly bolt to seed or see them fall victim to fungal diseases. Modifying growing conditions to create protected microclimates combined with selection of seasonally appropriate varieties makes it possible to grow lettuce year round in frost-free climates.*

**Planting and Harvest:** *Successful lettuce growing is easy, but plants do have a high requirement for water and nutrients. In cool, frost-free climates it is possible to grow heading types all year round, but in warm climates, culture of heading types is restricted to the cooler months with Cos and non-heading varieties more suitable for late spring, summer and early autumn planting. Lettuce may be sown from seed or planted as seedlings. With adequate water and nutrients it is possible to produce a harvest in six weeks.*

### **Ready, Set, Grow!**

Lettuces are hungry for nutrients so be sure to incorporate plenty of well-decomposed compost and manure prior to planting. Plants are shallow rooted so no-dig gardens and containers are also suitable for lettuce growing. Do not despair however if your soil is only moderately fertile, simply apply compost tea or other liquid fertiliser each week to boost growth. A soil pH of 6.5 – 7.5 is preferred. At no point should your plants be stressed or they will become bitter and bolt to seed prematurely. Mulch plants to retain soil moisture.



### **Sow Your Own**

Failure of seeds to germinate is typically the result of planting seeds when temperatures are too warm, covering the seeds too deeply or allowing seeds to dry out. In hot weather it may be better to plant crops in cooler, shaded areas of the garden, erect temporary shade structures or germinate seeds in containers placed in cool, shaded conditions. Sprinkle the seeds over the surface of the soil or seed raising mixture, press them down lightly and water well. Mixing seeds with a little dry washed river sand can help to distribute the seeds more evenly without impeding germination. Water the seeds regularly to prevent them from drying out. Seeds should germinate in 7-10 days.

### **Notes for the Novice**

Novice gardeners or those impatient for quick results may opt to plant seedlings. Soak seedlings in a weak solution of seaweed fertiliser prior to planting to reduce transplanting shock. Any remaining liquid can be used to water plants in. Avoid disturbing the roots when planting. Plant 30cm apart or take advantage of any space in-between slow maturing crops such as sweet corn. Remember that many



lettuce varieties look quite ornamental, so if you are short on space, plant them in the flower garden amongst your marigolds and petunias! Protect seedlings after planting by temporarily shading them for a few days.

Where temperatures are cold, lettuce may be protected under a plastic tunnel or grown under glass. Water crops early in the morning. Foliage that remains cold and wet overnight is potentially more vulnerable to disease.

### **Mesclun Mix**

Summer mesclun salad mixes commonly contain a variety of greens. Some seed companies sell premixed packs, but you can create your own mix, tailor made to your taste and climate. Simply mix together seeds of a variety of lettuce types, mizuna, corn salad, rocket and your choice of summer growing Asian greens. Add a few herbs and flowers for colour and spice such as parsley, nasturtiums, dill, marigolds or calendulas.

Sprinkle a little of the seed mix over an existing no dig garden or an area of prepared soil measuring approximately one square metre. Press the seed lightly into the soil, pushing the bigger seeds in with your finger. Water well. Keep moist until the seeds germinate and allow plants to mature for 3-4 weeks before harvesting. The close germination of seeds prevents weed competition and the area will provide continuous picking for a 2-3 week period. Store any excess seed mix in a clean, airtight container and place in cool, dark cupboard. Sow a new area of seed when you start to harvest the first garden.

### **Take Heart**

**Iceberg**, **Imperial**, **Great Lakes** and **Webb Wonderful** are typical of the hearting or traditional crisphead varieties. Cup-shaped leaves in the centre of the plant form into a tight head that provides a single harvest. Growth of these varieties is slow compared with non-hearting types and plants are adapted to cool conditions. When grown during warm weather, hearting varieties such as these can tend to bolt to seed prematurely and are more disease prone.

### **Just Be Cos**

Cos or Romaine types such as **Cos Verdi** and **Champion Cos Eclipse** are the classic Caesar salad lettuce. They typically form loose hearts and are distinguished by their stiff midribs and narrow, upright foliage. In the home garden, leaves can be harvested individually over a period of around six weeks or cut as entire plants. **Brown Romaine** shows good heat resistance while **Little Gem** is ideal for small households or container growing. **Red Ruffles** and **Rouge D'Hiver** have deep red foliage and are best suited to cold climates.

### **Progressive Pickers**

Non-hearting or leaf types form loose frilled or crinkled bunches of leaves rather than solid heads. They are fast maturing, may be harvested whole or by progressively picking the outer leaves and generally show increased tolerance to hot conditions. The frilly edged, red foliage of **Lollo Rosso** is particularly decorative. Popular heat tolerant varieties in subtropical and tropical regions include **Green Salad Bowl**, **Royal Oak Leaf** and **Darwin**. **Oakleaf** will tolerate some shade.

### **Soft and Buttery**

Butterhead types form soft, loose heads of smooth, buttery leaves. **Red** and **Green Mignonette** are the best known of this group. **Sangria** has attractive red foliage and is well suited to cooler districts, while **Buttercrunch** is heat resistant and fast maturing. The diminutive **Tom Thumb** is ideal for the pottager or container garden.

### **Lettuce Lament**

Seedlings are prone to attack from snails and slugs, so barriers and traps should be used. Lettuces also suffer occasional attack from mildew diseases, but these are often the result of climatic conditions or poor cultural practices. Ensure that the soil is well-drained and increase the air circulation around plants. Apply foliar applications of seaweed fertiliser to build disease resistance, reduce overuse of nitrogen rich manure and avoid wetting the foliage during watering.

**Seed Saving Tips:**

While lettuce are generally self-pollinating it is best to isolate different varieties. This can be done by only allowing one type to flower at any one time or by separating different varieties with temporary structures or tall crops. Small yellow daisy flowers form on the tall spike that emerges from the centre of the plant. Three to five days later the fluffy white seed heads form containing black, brown or white seeds are ready for collection. Look for plants that show good growth and disease resistance. Avoid saving seeds from plants that bolt quickly to seed, as this characteristic will tend to be inherited.