

Growing Lettuce & Other Greens

Overview

Lettuce and leafy greens are wonderful crops for new and experienced gardeners alike. Their short growing season allows quick results and multiple crops per season. Their low cultural requirements make them adaptable to apartment balconies as well as backyard gardens. Their high ornamental value makes them an excellent edible to tuck into patio containers. Unlike most vegetables, greens can tolerate some shade, and growing your own is economical. A single packet of seed contains an average of 2,000 seeds and can provide several months' worth of loose-leaf mix, one of the more expensive gourmet items in the market.

Common Leafy Vegetables

- Loose-leaf lettuce:
Oak Leaf, Red Sails, Salad Bowl
- Loose-head lettuce:
Buttercrunch, Bibb, Boston
- Romaine lettuce:
Valmaine, Cos
- Iceberg lettuce:
Summertime, Red Iceberg
- Spinach:
Asian – cool season or broadleaf
New Zealand – warm season

Other Greens with Similar Cultural Needs

- Arugula: adds a pleasant nutty flavor
- Mustard: provides mild spice
- Bok choy: best used in stir-fry
- Swiss chard and kale: sturdy, cold-hardy plants; cook to serve

How to Start

Lettuce and other greens can be grown from either seed or transplants. The guideline for

planting seed is to sow them at a depth equal to 2 to 4 times their width. In other words, the finer the seed, the shallower it should be sown. Refer to the seed packet for additional information.

Direct sow: remove all weeds; amend soil, if needed. Level bed, sprinkle lightly with seeds, and cover them with $\frac{1}{4}$ inch soil. As plants grow, thin to avoid overcrowding and to ensure that plants left in the bed have room to develop into heads. Young seedlings can be used as “baby greens”.

Transplants: choose vigorous plants; soak well in pots prior to planting to ensure they are thoroughly watered. Loosen roots and plant in the ground or a container.

Container planting: Containers are ideal for growing lettuce and other greens. Begin with a good container mix. Good loamy garden soil may substitute no more than $\frac{1}{3}$ of the total mix.

For every 2.5 cubic feet of medium without added fertilizer, add 1 cup dolomite lime, 1 cup cottonseed or alfalfa meal or $\frac{2}{3}$ cup blood meal, 2 cups bone meal or soft rock phosphate, and 1 cup kelp meal.

For ease of harvesting, group crops by cultural need and growth habit. For example, lettuce has longer growing season than broccoli. Growing them in different containers allows you to harvest broccoli weeks before lettuce is done. The container can be used for something else.

When to Plant

Minimum soil temperature should be 40 to 45 degrees. Soil in raised beds and containers will reach this temperature earlier than ground soil. Use a soil thermometer, available at nurseries and garden supply centers, to check your soil temperature.

Leafy greens grow best when air temperature is 60 to 70 degrees. Cooler weather

will not damage plants but will merely slow growth.

Plant greens in early spring through early summer for summer harvest. For fall harvest, plant greens in late summer.

Hot weather causes greens to bolt or set seed. When this happens, leaves become coarse and bitter. Slow-bolt or long-standing varieties do better in summer.

Soil

Greens are adaptable to various soil types; however, heavy clay soils should be amended with compost or sand to ensure good drainage. Lettuce grown in wet conditions is susceptible to white mold (*Sclerotinia sclerotiorum*).

Greens require approximately 1 inch of water per week; water greens frequently to keep soil moist. If you choose to water overhead, be sure to allow the leaves to dry before evening.

Fertilizer

Greens have shallow roots and need only 7 to 8 inches of fertile soil. Apply a nitrogen fertilizer at a rate of 0.2 pounds per 100 square feet.

Slugs

Moist, shaded soil beneath lettuce plants and sweet, tender leaves create a perfect

environment for slugs. Slugs can be handled in several environmentally-friendly manners. Cutting them in half with scissors is easy. Traps made of small tins such as tuna fish cans, recessed so the upper edge is slightly higher than the soil and filled with beer, attract slugs.

If using commercial slug bait, make sure that it is safe for pets and other animals that may visit your garden.

Harvesting and Storing

Harvest greens in the morning before leaves begin to wilt. Harvest "baby greens" by snipping the entire plant at ground level, leaving enough room between remaining plants to develop into heads. To harvest from heads, either snip the entire plant at ground level or pinch off only outer leaves. Leaving the inner leaves allows the plant to continue producing.

Right after harvest, refresh lettuce by soaking in a basin of cool water for 15 minutes. Spin or drain well, seal tightly, and refrigerate for up to three days.

To cook Swiss chard or kale, trim out the center rib which can be tough or bitter. Chop leaves and sauté in a small amount of olive oil. Garlic, salt, and pepper are all good additions. Center ribs are good in soup or stew.

OSU Extension Service Resources

Visit your OSU Extension Service office at 200 Warner-Milne Road, Oregon City, for these publications, or get them online at <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/catalog>

Grow your own lettuce, spinach, and Swiss chard (EC 1268)

Planning and preparing your vegetable garden site (EC 1228)

Raised bed gardening (FS 270)

Gardening with composts, mulches, and row covers (EC 1247)

Sustainable Gardening Handbook (EM 8742)

Master Gardener™ Advice

- Call the Home Horticulture Helpline: 503-655-8631 (Clackamas County); 503-821-1150 (Washington County); or 503-445-4608 (Multnomah County).
- For more 10-Minute University™ handouts and class schedule, visit www.cmastergardeners.org or www.metromastergardeners.org.
- Look for Master Gardeners at area Farmers' Markets.

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