



Growing Salad Greens

In Sonoma County, with the right gardening practices and crop variety selection, we can harvest salad greens twelve months of the year. Refer to the [Vegetable Planting Summary](#) and [food gardening articles](#) on the UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County website for more information about the characteristics and growing conditions for many leafy greens.

Considerations when growing salad greens

Choices

- For tasty, attractive salads, grow a variety of lettuces and other greens such as arugula, curly endive, escarole, radicchio, mizuna, tatsoi, watercress, mâche, bok choy, spinach, looseleaf Chinese cabbage, komatsuma, and mustard. Lettuces may be heads, loose leaf, butterhead, romaine, or Batavian (shaped like a butterhead but crisp like head lettuce). Many of these are available in red and green. Some seed companies sell several salad mixes: mild, piquant, French, Italian, etc.
- The seasonal weather prediction will influence crop and variety selection. Fall selection will depend on whether the crop will be harvested in the fall or harvested in the winter and/or early spring. Some crops, such as lettuce, are semi-hardy (able to survive a light frost) while others, such as spinach and kale, are cold-hardy (able to survive a hard freeze). If growing salad greens in warm weather, select slow-bolting or heat-tolerant varieties.

Planting

- Most planting dates in Sonoma County are from February through October. If planted in well-draining soil and brought to maturity during the fall, lettuce can be harvested over a mild winter. Plant head lettuce in early spring only. For other lettuce varieties, plant every two to three weeks from spring through fall for continued harvest. There are a number of other leafy greens that will overwinter.
- Direct seeded plants may be started in containers and, when the seedlings have at least two sets of true leaves, may be set out in the garden. When transplanting, space plants depending on the size of the plant you want to harvest. A fully developed head of lettuce requires 12 inches or more; lettuces harvested at 3- to 4-inches tall may be grown an inch or two apart.
- For a winter harvest, direct sow or transplant greens with enough time to bring them to maturity by either the [first average frost/freeze date](#) or November 18—whichever occurs first. At Sonoma County's latitude, November 18 is the last day with at least ten hours of daylight; plant growth slows significantly or stops with less than ten hours of sunlight.
- Cool-weather crops that are direct seeded, like leafy greens, prefer warm soil (ideally 60-65 degrees F) and warm air temperatures (ideally 65-75 degrees F) for germination. Whereas transplants can tolerate soil temperatures as low as 40 degrees F. This information is helpful when planning the spring garden or transitioning from a summer to a fall garden.
- To protect greens in warm weather, plant on the north or east side of a building or where they will be shaded by taller or trellised warm-weather crops.

Growing Conditions

- Salad greens grow best in fertile soil—use good quality compost for adequate soil nutrition.
- Many greens are fast growing and shallow rooted, requiring regular moisture (but not wet soil). Inadequate irrigation may cause bolting (going to seed) with tough and bitter leaves. A mulch of rice straw, shredded leaves or other organic material will retain soil moisture and suppress weeds that compete for water, nutrients, and light.

- If you scattered seeds in a bed or planted seeds in a row closer than recommended, start removing plants (thinning) when they are 3- to 4-inches tall. Leave 8 to 12 inches between plants in rows. Cut the plants off at ground level to avoid disturbing the roots of the plants that are left to grow. Use your thinnings for salad.

Protection

- Most salad greens will tolerate light frosts with no protection. But when a freeze or extended frost is predicted, provide appropriate protection depending on the cold-hardiness of the salad green. Frost protection can be provided with a cold frame or a floating row cover such as Reemay, or drape frost cloth or bed sheets on supports, securing the cloth to the ground. Open the cold frame or remove cloth on sunny winter days.
- Greens grown during the cool season have few pests except for snails and slugs. Control them by hand picking or with baits or traps.
- Greens grown during the warm season are subject to attack by flea beetles, leaf miners and, for greens in the Brassica family, cabbageworms. Seedlings are the most likely to be seriously damaged. Protect them with a floating row cover whose edges are firmly held down, or germinate seeds in a greenhouse or indoors. Or avoid the problem altogether by not growing greens over the summer. For more information about managing pests, see UC's [Integrated Pest Management \(IPM\)](#) page.

Harvest

- When harvesting leaf lettuce and a number of leafy greens, remove the entire plant or use the “cut and come again” method: when the leaves are 3- to 4-inches tall, cut them off without harming the crown of the plant (leave 1 to 2 inches on the plant). New leaves will grow from the crown. Plants can be cut three to four times before they must be replaced. When removing spent plants, cut them at the soil line and leave the roots in the soil for minimum soil disturbance whenever possible.
- For salads, harvest them when they are small and tender. When they are larger, cook them in dishes such as stir-fries.

Containers

- You don't need a garden to grow salad greens. If you are short on space, grow lettuces and other salad greens in containers. A container 10- to 18-inches wide and 8-inches deep (with drainage) will be adequate for most salad greens. If growing leaf lettuce, a 6-inch depth will be sufficient. Fill the container with an organic potting mix. Smaller containers can be moved to protect them from afternoon sun during warm months or from hard freezes or heavy downpours during cool months, or to take advantage of daylight as the fall and winter sun becomes lower in the sky.

For help with your garden problems, call the Master Gardener hotline at 565-2608 or visit the Master Gardener information desk in the University of California Cooperative Extension office (133 Aviation Blvd., # 109, Santa Rosa), or ask a Master Gardener at your local farmers market or the Sonoma County Fair or other event. See our website at <http://ucanr.edu/sites/scmg/> for additional publications.

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