

Growing Salad Greens

- ☞ For tasty, attractive salads, grow a variety of lettuces and other greens such as arugula, curly endive, mizuna, tatsoi, garden cress, and mustard. Lettuces may be heads, loose leaf, butterhead, romaine, or Batavian (shaped like a butterhead but crisp like head lettuce); most are of these are available in red and green.. Some seed companies sell several salad mixes: mild, piquant, French, Italian, etc.
- ☞ With some protection when the weather is very hot or very cold, some salad greens can be grown all year. Recommended planting dates in Sonoma County are from February through October.
- ☞ Lettuce grows best spring through fall. It won't grow much in winter, but can be left in the garden for winter harvesting — it won't die unless it is flooded. Plant head lettuce in early spring only. For other lettuce varieties, plant every 2 to 3 weeks from spring through fall for continued harvest.
- ☞ Other greens grow well fall through spring. For salads, harvest them when they are small and tender. When they get larger, cook them in dishes such as stir-fries.
- ☞ For summer growing, select “slow bolting” varieties. (When plants that grow as rosette of leaves “bolt”, they send up flower stalks and will set seed. When this happens, the leaves are usually not very good for salads, since they grow tougher and more bitter.) In hot weather, provide some shade for your lettuce — put it on the north or east side of a building to protect from afternoon sun, or build a frame and use shade cloth, or plant it where it will be shaded by taller crops such as tomatoes. Provide plenty of water and harvest while the plants are small, as lettuce will grow bitter in warm weather.
- ☞ For winter harvest, start the plants in the fall (seeds won't germinate well when the soil is too cold). Since growth is slow in the winter, the plants can stay in the garden for a longer period than in the summer. You can provide some frost protection with a cold frame or a floating row cover such as Reemay. Most salad greens will tolerate light frosts with no protection.
- ☞ When harvesting, remove the entire plant or use the “cut and cut again” method: When the leaves are 3 to 4 inches high, 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 3 or 4 times, then pulled out and replaced.
- ☞ Lettuces and greens may be seeded directly or started in containers and set out in the garden. Spacing in the garden depends 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 may be grown an inch or two apart. You can do both: sow the seeds about an inch apart in rows 4 to 6 inches apart. When the plants are 3 to 4 inches high, start removing plants, leaving 8 to 12 inches between rows and 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 the plants you remove for salad.
- ☞ Lettuces have few pests except for snails and slugs. Control them by hand picking or with baits or traps. Although we haven't performed controlled experiments to prove this, some gardeners have noticed that slugs and snails will eat green lettuces while leaving the red ones alone.
- ☞ Greens such as mustard, arugula, mizuna, tatsoi are subject to attack by flea beetles in warm weather. Seedlings are most likely to be seriously damaged. Protect them with a floating row cover whose edges are firmly held down, or start transplants in a greenhouse or under screens. Or avoid the problem altogether by not growing these plants in the summer. (Start seeds for fall planting in late summer.)
- ☞ In your garden, plant different varieties of greens separately (in stripes or a checkerboard or a more complicated pattern) or mix them together. (Many seed companies sell single packets containing a mixture of salad green.) If you are short on space, grow lettuces in a container.