

City Leaf

Grow food, not flowers

Growing Salad Leaves: Top Tips for Urban Gardeners

In the city, growing your own salad makes a lot of sense. There are many reasons for this: the leaves are expensive to buy; the selection in shops is poor; they're grown easily in small spaces; you harvest fresh leaves on demand; they're not doused in chemicals; certain varieties can be harvested more than once; there are dozens of varieties to try, with a wide spectrum of textures, colours and flavours; and you can grow them all year round, if you choose the right varieties.



Credit: Sara Davies, getgrowing.org.uk



Credit: Charles Dowding, charlesdowding.com

Buying seed

You'll find the more interesting varieties online, rather than the garden centre. Try realseeds.co.uk; kingsseeds.com; tamarorganics.co.uk; tuckersseeds.co.uk. People often ask if it's worth paying a bit extra for organic seed. The choice is yours: buying organic supports businesses which follow organic principles and the seed varieties are suited to organic growing techniques. Store your seed in a Tupperware box in the fridge.

Varieties – lettuce

In a nutshell, there are two ways to grow lettuce. You can aim for a firm, crunchy heart, harvesting the whole plant at once. Or simply pluck off the outer leaves every few weeks, letting the plant regrow – by far the easiest method.

Don't sow too many at any one time. You don't want a glut. It's better to sow a few every couple of months, as long as you can keep slugs at bay. Don't be too rigid about this. Plants grow at different speeds at different times of year, so let their size be your guide. Picking occasional leaves, regularly, can prolong lettuce

life-span and reduce the frequency of sowings. With lettuce, note that they are loosely grouped into different types:

Butterhead lettuces are grown mainly for their hearts. They have soft, pale waxy leaves enveloping an even paler and waxier heart. The young leaves tend to lie low on the soil. They wilt fast once picked. An example is *Marvel of Four Seasons*.

Cos lettuces have the darkest green leaves of any lettuce. They grow upright, which makes for easy picking. They tend to prefer warm summer weather. Try *Lobjoits*.

Batavia lettuces have firm, slightly crisp leaves of many colours and shiny hues. Their character lies somewhere between a butterhead and a cos. The leaves can be picked continually. Many varieties are hardy through winter. Try *Grenoble Red*.

Crisp lettuces are generally grown for their dense, pale hearts. Iceberg is a famous example. Try *Webb's Wonderful*.

Loose-leaf lettuces are best for plucking off the outer leaves, letting the inner leaves regrow. Try *Freckles*, *Grenoble Red*, and *Bronze Arrowhead*.

For winter lettuce, look out for hardy varieties such as Lattuginho (looseleaf), Rouge D'Hiver (cos) and May King (butterhead).

Other Salad Leaves

Salad is not all about lettuce. To get your salad really interesting, there are dozens of options. Many can be harvested with the 'cut and come again' method (CCA), which may give you three or four harvests from a single plant.

FOR SOWING MARCH-AUGUST

Beet leaves are from the beetroot family. But some varieties, such as *Bull's Blood Beet*, can also be for their attractive crimson leaves. **Spinach** is also of the beetroot family and has the mildest flavour with a tang of iron. **Chard** can be grown for baby leaves. *Rainbow* or *Bright Lights* are best for their multi-coloured stems.

Kale can also be grown for its baby leaves. Try *Redbor* and *Red Russian*.

Herbs such as dill, sorrel and coriander are all good for adding flavour to salads.

Orache, also known as mountain spinach, has lovely velvety leaves. The seed does not last long, so sow all you buy in the same year.

Edible flowers such as nasturtiums, calendula (marigolds), heartsease and flowering shoots of oriental leaves add enticing colour and even more flavour to salads.

FOR SOWING LATE JUNE TO EARLY SEPTEMBER

Endive is a classic leaf for autumn and winter. The leaves are on the bitter side, and are often blanched before eating. To do this, simply cover with a flower pot for a week or so before harvest.

Radichio is another bitter leaf for winter, and is one of many possible chicories of varied colour and taste.

ORIENTALS such as mizuna, mibuna, pak choi and tatsoi are brilliant to grow through autumn and winter, also until April.

Mustards are one of the most rewarding oriental leaves and come in many shapes, colours and sizes. They are hardy and will last through winter. *Red Giant* will grow enormous purple leaves. Note that the leaves get hotter as they grow. The heat vanishes if you apply heat, for example by tossing them in a stir fry. *Red* and *Green Frills* have pretty feathery leaves and a less pungent flavour.

Land Cress is another spicy plant for winter leaves. It's similar to watercress, but easier to grow and has pretty, edible yellow flowers through April.

Sowing Seed

The seed is often tiny. So carefully sprinkle into moist, quality compost or soil and then cover with a very fine layer of compost. You can do this in module trays, pots and seed trays. Once growing, water them gently so that you don't disturb their roots. In extreme heat, keep lettuce seed in the shade until germinated. Note that salad leaves sown in early spring may take six weeks until their first cut or pick, but as little as a month in the height of summer.

Growing in Containers

With their shallow roots, salad crops are ideal for window boxes, pots, hanging baskets or any recycled container. Place in your sunniest spot, away from any hiding places for the dreaded slugs. Fill with multipurpose compost (not soil) and don't let them dry out, as this stresses the plant out and may encourage it to go to seed.

Growing in the Garden

Lettuces prefer a light, well-drained, moisture-retentive, fertile soil, PH 6-7. If you have a rotation, they can be used in between the main groups as a catch crop – a quick and easy harvest to fill the gap. All salad crops love growing in compost and

grow superbly in compost-filled raised beds.

The Perfect Salad

The ideal salad is a balance of textures, colours and flavours. If your leaves are a bit floppy, soak them in a sink of fresh water for an hour to perk them up. With salad dressings, don't be stingy on the salt. And dry your leaves thoroughly, perhaps with a salad spinner, before slapping it on. Another trick is to let the dressing stand for ten minutes or so before serving so that the flavours can thoroughly mingle.

Here are a few dressing ideas:

Pascal's Creole dressing

1 large clove of garlic or 2 small ones, crushed or finely chopped
Large pinch of sea salt
1 lime, squeezed
4 tbsp olive oil

Add salt to crushed garlic and press together until a paste is formed. Squeeze lime juice into paste, stir. Add olive oil. Taste and add more seasoning if required.

Sweet balsamic

2 tbsp balsamic vinegar
6 tbsp olive oil
1 tsp honey or maple syrup
½ tsp wholegrain
Salt and pepper to taste

Put in all the ingredients in a jar. Put the lid on and shake well. Taste and adjust seasoning as necessary.

Summer Miso

Whisk together equal quantities of orange juice and olive oil. Add a dollop of white miso paste and whisk again to thicken.

Books:

'Salad Leaves for All Seasons' by Charles Dowding
'Oriental Salad Leaves' by Joy Larkcom

Websites:

charlesdowding.com
cityleaf.co.uk
getgrowing.org.uk
growingcommunities.org

Blogs:

growingtales.wordpress.com
cityleaf.wordpress.com

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