



Vegetable Gardening Tips

Growing Information for the Home Gardener Series



Lettuce

Planting Dates

Lettuce is one of the most widely used vegetable crops in our diet. We consume lettuce as a base for salads, on sandwiches and burgers to add texture and even as a garnish to decorate trays of food at parties.

Growing lettuce in the home garden just makes sense, since we consume so much of this versatile vegetable. It is an edible crop that also is a beautiful one, as well. Lettuce adds to the aesthetics of a garden because it can be found in a multitude of varieties that vary in shape, color and flavor.

Because lettuce is a fast growing crop, it can be planted multiple times from late summer into the fall season. Lettuce planting dates range from mid-August through mid-October in south Louisiana and from mid-August through late September in north Louisiana. Lettuce also can be planted throughout the month of January. Planting lettuce outside of these dates usually results in bitter tasting lettuce that easily bolts.

Most lettuce varieties mature within 30 to 60 days, with leaf lettuces maturing earlier than head types.



Types and Varieties

There are four major categories of lettuce: crisphead, butterhead, cos and loose-leaf.

Crisphead

Crisphead lettuce also is commonly referred to as iceberg lettuce. Crisphead has a large solid head similar to a cabbage. The foliage is crisp and brittle, with prominent veins and midribs. Crisphead is more tolerant of shipping and handling than all other types and therefore is the leading type of lettuce grown in the United States and the most common lettuce found in grocery stores. Note, however, that head lettuces usually mature later than other types and thus are more prone to bolting, especially when planted in early spring.

Recommended crisphead lettuce varieties include Crispino, Great Lakes, Keeper, Ithaca, Maverick and Raider.

Butterhead

Butterhead lettuce has smooth, soft and pliable leaves that form a loose head. The veins and midribs are not as prominent as crisphead types and are considered to have better quality and a more delicate flavor than crisphead lettuce. Butterhead lettuces are very attractive plants in flower beds and gardens. There are two subgroups of butterhead lettuce: Boston and bibb lettuce. Bibb lettuce is smaller and darker green than Boston lettuce.

Recommended varieties of Butterhead lettuce include Buttercrunch, Caliente, Skyphos, Esmeralda, Summer Bibb and Harmony.

Cos

Cos lettuce, also known as romaine lettuce, has long narrow foliage with an upright growth habit and loose elongated heads. Romaine lettuces are firmer than loose-leaf lettuces, with a crispy, yet tender, center rib.

Recommended Varieties of Cos lettuce

include Cimarron Red, Cuore, Flashy Trout Back, Green Towers, Parris Island Cos, Red Eye, Tall Guzman Elite and Musena.

Loose-leaf

Loose-leaf lettuce produces an open rosette of leaves loosely arranged on the stalk. There is a considerable amount of variation in leaf color within loose-leaf lettuce varieties, ranging from green and purple to red. There also is variation in loose-leaf texture and margin shape. This type of lettuce also is another attractive plant for fall color in the garden.

Recommended varieties of loose-leaf lettuce

include these green-leaf varieties: Leaf, Grand Rapids, Oak Leaf, Prizehead, Nevada, Salad Bowl, Sierra and Tango and these red-leaf varieties: New Red Fire, Red Sails, Red Salad Bowl, Lolla Rossa and Cherokee.



Culture

Seeding and Transplanting

To grow your own lettuce transplants, start seeds four weeks prior to the first planting date. Grow transplants in a well-lit area, and be sure to check the soil daily for adequate moisture. Only plant lettuce twice as deep as a seed is wide. Some lettuce seeds require light to germinate. For these varieties, simply sow the seeds on top of the soil and gently water in. Read the seed packages for more information.

Loose-leaf lettuce can be sown directly into the garden. Just be very careful not to plant the seeds too deep. Consider successive plantings for head lettuces to reduce having to harvest all of the lettuce at one time. Plant only a portion of the row, wait a few weeks and then finish planting the row. This will ensure you reap the benefits of all you grow.

Loose-leaf lettuce should be thinned to 4-6 inches between plants. Head lettuce (cos, butterhead and crisphead) should be transplanted into the garden on 12 inch centers.

Lettuce has shallow roots. Water deeply several times a week to encourage roots to grow deeper into the soil. Mulching helps to keep soil cooler in warm weather, helps retain soil moisture and aids in the prevention of some diseases. In addition, mulches prevent the bottoms of the lettuce heads from getting dirty. No one cares for gritty sand and clay particles when eating a salad.

Fertilizing

Before planting lettuce in the garden, incorporate fertilizer into the soil. A complete fertilizer such as 13-13-13 generally is recommended. About 5-6 pounds per 100-foot row or ½ pound per 10-foot row is adequate. Alternative options such as compost, aged manures and other fertilizer sources also are acceptable choices. Mix fertilizer into the soil and water in at least one week prior to transplanting and seeding to avoid burning the crop.

Side-dress lettuce three weeks after planting or when leaves are about 4 inches wide. Fertilizers higher in nitrogen usually are used at this time. A fertilizer with 15 percent nitrogen would be applied at a rate of 4 pounds per 100-foot row, ½ pound per 10 foot row or 1 tablespoon per plant. The side-dressing application should be made approximately 8 inches from the base of the plant and watered in immediately.

Insect Management

The most common pests of lettuce include worms and aphids. Worms have chewing mouthparts and create large visible holes in the lettuce leaves. Treat worm-infested lettuce with Bt, Spinosad and Sevin products. Aphids have piercing/sucking mouthparts and cause stippling on lettuce leaves. Aphids are found on the undersides of the foliage. Treat aphids with horticultural oils and insecticidal soaps.

Plant Diseases and Disorders

Damping-off, lettuce drop, bottom rot, downy mildew and lettuce mosaic virus are the most common diseases of lettuce. Tip burn, a physiological disorder, also is common in lettuce.

Soil fungi and water molds cause damping off. Disease can occur prior to seed germination or following germination, causing the seed to rot or the seedling to suddenly die. Disease occurs most often when weather conditions are cool and wet. To prevent damping off, plant fungicide-treated seed, increase plant spacing and do not seed into cool or wet soil.

Downy mildew is another water mold disease that occurs during cool and wet weather conditions. The disease can occur at any growth stage from seedling to mature plants. Diseased leaves have yellow spots on the upper surfaces of the leaves and white moldy growth on the undersides of the leaves. Downy mildew can be managed successfully by planting resistant varieties, increasing plant spacing to promote air movement and using drip irrigation.



Lettuce drop and bottom rot are caused by fungi found in the soil. Infected lettuce plants first appear slimy or rotted at the base of the plants. Entire diseased plants eventually rot and collapse. Control is difficult, but using mulches as a barrier between the crop and the soil, managing soil fertility so plants are not too succulent and keeping plants dry will help to slow disease development. Irrigation in the morning and drip irrigation should be used if any fungus is present in the soil.

Lettuce mosaic virus, also known as LMV, is a virus that is transmitted by seed and spread by aphids. This virus can infect all types of lettuce, as well as endive



and escarole. Weeds are reservoirs for lettuce mosaic virus. Disease symptoms vary greatly depending on the age and type of lettuce. Plants may be stunted, deformed or show a mosaic or mottling pattern. Head lettuces may not form complete heads if infected early in the season. To prevent disease, purchase virus-tested seed, plant resistant varieties and monitor and treat for aphids. Horticultural oils, insecticidal soaps and releasing ladybugs (lady beetle) in the garden all will reduce aphid populations. Finally, removing infected plants and weeds in or around the garden will reduce the spread of the virus.

Tip burn is the most common and easily recognized physiological disorder of lettuce. Tip burn is a calcium deficiency in the tissue that causes the edges of young and maturing leaves to turn brown or have a speckled appearance. The disorder can be controlled by planting resistant varieties, avoiding cultural practices such as over-fertilizing that promote rapid and excessive growth and maintaining the soil moisture at uniform levels.

Accurate and rapid identification of the pest problem is essential for effective pest management and control. Homeowners are encouraged to submit a sample to the LSU AgCenter's Plant Diagnostic Center in Baton Rouge for correct identification. Consult the LSU AgCenter's Louisiana Plant Disease Management Guide or Insect Pest Management Guide for a list of pesticides available for home garden use.

Uses

In addition to salad greens, lettuce has multiple purposes in the kitchen. It can be used to roll appetizers, such as a cabbage roll. Similarly, it can be rolled like sushi in place of nori.

Even more, although most people don't consider lettuce as an ingredient in soup, cream of lettuce soup is a tasty and refreshing dish. Romaine lettuces are a better choice for cream of lettuce soup because of the slight peppery flavor, but any lettuce that is abundant will suffice.

Long, thin strips, or chiffonade, of lettuce can be tossed in salads such as chicken, pasta or egg salad or sprinkled on top of many dishes as a garnish to add a cheerful burst of green to otherwise drab dishes.

**Be adventurous in
planting lettuce
and finding new
recipes to try!**



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