

YUMMY NORTHWEST

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 SERVING IDAHO, MONTANA, OREGON, AND WASHINGTON

Great greens

Spring brings the promise of luscious greens. Grow your own or buy them from a local farmer. But eat plenty.

Some lettuce history

The first lettuce plants were probably weeds growing around the Mediterranean Sea. Evidence shows lettuce has been cultivated since about 4500 B.C. and possibly used by every culture.

Christopher Columbus is thought to have first imported lettuce to the New World.

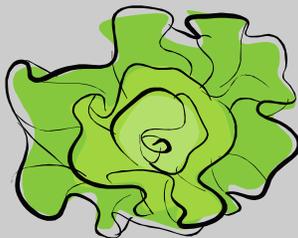
As the United States grew, most lettuce, a Batavia variety, came from New York. After blight hit those crops, California began to dominate the market in the 1920s, and now 95 percent of the lettuce grown in the U.S. comes from California and Arizona. In the shadow of those giants, Washington State makes a significant contribution, with most of its crop grown in the Puget Sound area.

Modern lettuce, particularly iceberg, has bitter taste bred out. It's a sad fact, but the more bitter the lettuce the more nutrients it has.

Using lettuce

Apart from salads and chopped condiments, lettuce can be used in many cooked dishes, including stir-frys, soups, and braised items. (Romaine is particularly good braised with bacon bits and hard-cooked eggs, similar to a warm spinach salad.) The darker green the leaves, the better they will hold up to heat.

Or wrap fresh leaves around a filling, such as tabbouleh (a crunchy salad made with bulgur, mint, lemon juice, and other spices) or even crunchy peanut butter.



Lettuce Facts

Lettuce is a member of the Asteraceae family, which includes daisies and sunflowers.

Lettuce is the second most popular fresh vegetable in the United States. Tomatoes are number one.

Americans eat about 30 pounds of lettuce per year.

Because it is easy to ship, iceberg lettuce is the main variety eaten in the United States.

The largest lettuce head recorded in the world so far weighed 25 pounds and was grown in Willaston, England, in 1974. In the Pacific Northwest region, a loose-leaf lettuce plant grown in 1791 on Vancouver Island, Canada, was reportedly 81 inches around.

Types of lettuce

o Batavia

Also called Summer Crisp. Grown mainly in France. A crunchy texture somewhere between iceberg and loose-leaf varieties.

o Butterhead

Also called Boston or Bibb lettuce. Leaves are soft and, well, buttery. Mild taste.

o Iceberg

Also called crisphead lettuce. Very mild flavor. So-named because when it used to be transported on crushed ice, heads bobbed on top and looked like icebergs.

o Loose Leaf

Comes in red and green varieties. Flavor and texture varies among varieties, but tends to be mild and buttery.

o Miner's lettuce

A member of the purslane family, this is a lettuce in name only. It is classified as a weed today, but in the 1800s Pacific Northwest miners ate this plant as a nutritious salad ingredient. To see photos and to learn more, go to the Oregon State University Extension Web site at http://oregonstate.edu/dept/nursery-weeds/weedspeciespage/miners_lettuce/Montia_or_Claytonia_perfoliata_miners_lettuce.html.

o Romaine

Also called cos lettuce. A more bitter flavor than iceberg, with elongated dark leaves.

o Stem

Also called Chinese lettuce. Grown mainly in China. This is an unusual-looking lettuce, with long spear-like leaves reaching straight up. The flavor is quite bitter, similar to dandelion greens.

Homegrown Daily Greens: An Experiment

By The Growing Gardener

We know eating leafy greens every day is good for us. And if homegrown, even better! But how does one grow lettuce in a small space (say, one shallow 24-inch container) and have a consistent crop every day, all season long?

Last year, my first attempt at growing loose-leaf lettuce resulted in one great salad—emphasis on *one*. What grew up next was an alien-looking thick stem with a few leaves and tiny flowers; the lettuce had bolted. That was it for lettuce crop 2007!

For 2008, I've done some homework. To learn more about lettuce-sowing basics, I consulted *Growing Vegetables West of the Cascades* by Steve Solomon, and *Bountiful Container* by Rose Marie Nichols McGee and Maggie Stuckey.

I've learned that lettuce is a cool-season plant and loves even moisture. With some planning, you can sow late spring *through* late fall. Lettuce is the perfect veggie for container gardening because it looks pretty in a bowl on a sunny picnic table, and when it gets too hot in the summer, you can move the container to a shady area. Lettuce will grow in full sun to partial shade in at least six inches of soil.

Grow lettuce in a hanging basket (hang it low for easy harvesting) and add strawberry plants to the mix! Slugs and snails might still find their way to the bliss, but it'll probably take longer.

For variety all season long, Solomon suggests mixing equal amounts of various lettuce seeds in a packet and sowing the seeds together to potentially stagger the harvest times. Depending on the variety, it takes between 40 and 50 days from seeding to maturity. You can buy premade seed packet mixes, called *mesclun*, but it's more fun to mix your own if you're interested in identifying and tracking the varieties.

Recommended loose-leaf varieties include Prizehead, Red Sails, Slowbolt, and Buttercrunch. The two latter varieties can overmature and hold their sweetness better than the two former varieties. A particularly



Speaking of lettuce...

Salads are the liveliest vegetables we eat. The chlorophyll in green things gives the body the greatest vitality and relays the sun's forces directly to the inner man. It is the green life-blood of the plant, the giver of strength and energy. If an apple a day keeps the doctor away, so will a salad. Both are effective deterrents to medical care.

— Helen Nearing

The cooling sanity of lettuce and every other herbal green, whose touch is calm, whose heart is clean.

— Louis Untermeyer

A housekeeper who has conquered the salad question can always add to the plainest dinner a desirable dish.

— M.E.W. Sherwood

special variety that long-time gardeners seem to love is an 1870s heirloom called Black Seeded Simpson. And if your climate is juuust right, I understand you can harvest it as early as 28 days!

Also, most loose-leaf varieties are cut-and-come-again plants. McGee and Stuckey mention that after a cutting, new growth will return within two weeks, and one plant is good for about three cycles of new growth.

If your town has a warmer climate than the maritime Pacific Northwest, check with your local nursery for what grows best in your area.

So, what I have gleaned from my research is that I made two mistakes with lettuce crop 2007, which were: 1) I bought lettuce *starts*, and 2) I bought lettuce starts too late in the season—the hot weather started the bolting.

Okay, buying lettuce starts isn't really a bad idea (if it's not too late in the season), but I *think* I'll have more lettuce for a longer time if I sow lettuce seeds in succession (a batch every two weeks starting now). Also, keep in mind that many plant nurseries carry veggie starts for only a very short period of time.

My expectation is that my lettuce plants will supplement my basic store-bought bag of spinach, but maybe I'll be surprised! I also predict that I'll have better tasting lettuce, more often, than if I waited for the lettuce to grow back after a harvest. But, maybe not ... I'll experiment with that, too. This experiment could be too much work for this lazy gardener.

The Growing Gardener is Gina Renee Lozier, a Seattle-area resident, a landscape and container garden designer, and an enthusiastic student of horticulture.



About Yummy Northwest

Each monthly issue highlights an edible delight available in the Pacific Northwest and Montana.

Contact the editor

Comments, corrections, topic ideas, and submissions are all most welcome at Yummy_Northwest@hotmail.com. View archives at yummynorthwest.com.