

LETTUCE (*Lactuca sativa*)



Part Shade



LETTUCE

Few salad vegetables exceed lettuce in popularity, and you should have little difficulty in growing it. Success in producing a steady supply of fresh, crisp leaves, rich in vitamin A, depends to a great extent upon an understanding of the habits of this plant.

Lettuce grows readily because all cultivated strains were obtained originally from the prickly lettuce (*L. Scariola*), an Asiatic weed. Prominent among other wild forms are sleep-wort (*L. virosa*) and the familiar wild lettuce (*L. canadensis*), a tall, yellow-flowered herb which is often a troublesome weed.

The Planting and Culture of Lettuce

Almost any fairly good garden soil that is well drained and not excessively acid is suitable for lettuce. The only real secret about growing fine plants is to keep them uncrowded and growing rapidly. Rapid growth demands an abundance of moisture plus an abundance of natural plant nutrients. Mature compost humus or well-rotted manure should be dug in along the row before the seed is sown. In transplanting, a generous amount of organic humus should be worked into the hole before the plant is set out.

Wild lettuce prefers a temperate climate and its cultivated descendants naturally thrive best during cool weather, although some loose-leafed strains are valued for their ability to grow during summer heat.

Heading lettuce may be planted to head-up either during the early summer or the fall. For the early crop the seed should be sown about 1/4 inch deep in flats or similar containers and placed in a sunny window or a cold frame about the beginning of March. The young plants should be ready to set out early in April. In the flats, the seed should be thinly sown and the seedlings thinned just as soon as the leaves touch. Probably no fault is more universal than sowing lettuce seed too thickly.

For the spring crop, start seed indoors in flats or pots in a sunny, cool (50 to 60°F. [10 to 15.56°C.]) location. Or, sow seed outside in a hotbed or cold frame, about four to six weeks before the last severe frost. One seed packet will sow a 100-foot row. For a good potting mixture, sift together one part sand, one part good loam and one part compost. Keep moist and, when the seedlings have at least their first set of true leaves, transplant to plant bands or flats. Gradually harden off the plants by setting them outdoors during the sunny part of the day.

Transplanting lettuce seedlings

Setting the transplants out very early is essential. In fact, some gardeners make a practice of sowing their lettuce seed in the fall in a carefully prepared area. The seedlings become fairly large before severe frost. As cold weather approaches, the seedlings are covered with a gradually deepened layer of loose straw, leaves, twigs, or other materials. Under this, the small

plants survive the winter easily and the gardener has a heavy supply of sturdy, very early seedlings upon which to draw.

In setting out the transplants, put them about 15 inches apart in the row in rows about two feet apart. When seed is sown directly into the garden, the seedlings should be ruthlessly thinned to stand at least a foot apart to prevent overcrowding.

The Care and nurture of Lettuce

In the early stages of growth the plant has a cluster of shallow feeding rootlets. This condition makes it ideal for transplanting but, while small, makes it an easy victim of weeds. A light mulching of compost sifted around the plants will do much to keep down weedy growth and later will supply easily available plant nutrients.

Lettuce plants will not do their best unless they have a very liberal supply of moisture. Normally the supply of rainwater is insufficient and unreliable. It will aid your plants to continue rapid growth during dry weather if you water them with rainwater which has filtered through a container holding a quantity of fertile compost.

It may be that for one of many reasons your plants do not reach the heading stage before the arrival of hot weather. Many gardeners have had this experience. ' The most popular solution to the problem consists in covering the plants so as to give them partial shade. A few stakes driven into the ground along the sides of the rows may be used to support a length of cheesecloth stretched upon them.

A slightly heavier framework may be made to support a thin layer of brush, or a slat roof in which the slats are alternated with spaces about equal to the width of the slats. Any such arrangement which excludes excessive sunlight will usually produce the coolness necessary to the plants if they are to form satisfactory heads. Some gardeners make good use of a partially shaded spot in the garden as a favored site for lettuce.

Lettuce Diseases and Pests

Lettuce rot, which first affects the lowest leaves in contact with the soil and then spreads through the plant, can be avoided by spreading clean sand over the surface of the soil. Fungus and bacterial diseases are best avoided by rotating the crop. Do not plant lettuce in the same rows two years in succession and do not plant where endive, chicory or dandelion have just grown. These are all subject to the same diseases.

Insects which cause the greatest damage in new lettuce plantings are cutworms and slugs. Cutworms may be outwitted if loose collars of stiff paper are put on the seedlings when they are planted. The collars are made about one to 1 1/2 inches in diameter and are wide enough so that when 1/2 inch is buried in the soil an inch or more remains as a barricade above ground.

If slugs are a problem, limestone or wood ashes may be sprinkled over the soil around the plants to discourage them. In a wet season when slugs are very bad, do not use small baskets or boxes to cover newly planted seedlings. These only act as shelters during the hot part of the day and slugs may sometimes be found by the dozens inside inverted berry boxes. Instead, shade seedlings with a canopy held a foot or more above the bed.

Harvesting Lettuce

Pick lettuce in the early morning hours to preserve the crispness it acquired during the cool of the night. Immediately after being picked, it should be washed thoroughly but as briefly as possible and dried immediately to prevent loss of vitamins. If stored in a closed container in the refrigerator, it will retain its crispness for days.

Loose-leaf types should be cut off at ground level and the roots left in the soil. Later in the season the roots will send up new leaves for a second crop.

Lettuce Varieties

Cultivated lettuce may be divided into five main types:

Butterhead These form a soft head, yellow almost to the center with dark outer leaves. Most varieties of Bibb lettuce mature in 60 to 70 days and have loosely folded leaves. Ford-hook and Dark Green Boston mature in 80 days and are known for their excellent flavor.

Cabbagehead This type is slightly more heat resistant than the butterhead varieties. Premier Great Lakes is resistant to heat and tip burn. Great Lakes stands up well in hot weather.

Celtuce This lettuce is grown for its thick stem rather than the leaves. Celtuce matures in 80 days, producing a vegetable with two or three times the vitamin C content of normal lettuce.

Cos or Romaine These form a tall, elongated head and have a leaf shaped some-what like the bowl of a spoon. Paris White is the favorite of this type. It matures in 80 days.

Loose-leaf, nonheading This type is best for home gardens since it can be grown where temperatures are too high for heading types. Grand Rapids is a crisp variety maturing in 45 days. Black-seeded Simpson is a brittle, crisp variety with a delicate flavor. Oak Leaf matures in about 40 days.