

GROWING LETTUCE

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Growing lettuce in the home garden is not hard to do. Nothing is better than a salad made with fresh lettuce from your garden. Many of the familiar lettuces can be grown locally during the early spring. Some varieties can withstand the heat of the summer, though best production is in the spring and again in the fall.

Climatic Requirements

Lettuce is a cool-season vegetable and develops best quality when grown under cool, moist conditions. Lettuce seedlings will tolerate a light frost. Temperatures between 45 F and 65 F are ideal. Such conditions usually prevail in Ohio in spring and fall. Seeds of leaf lettuce are usually planted in the spring as soon as the ground can be worked. Butterhead and romaine can be grown from either seeds or transplants. Due to its long-growing season, crisphead lettuce is grown from transplants. Transplants may be purchased or started indoors about six weeks before the preferred planting date.

Types of Lettuce

Crisphead lettuce is probably the most familiar of the four. It is characterized by a tight, firm head of crisp, light-green leaves. In general, crisphead lettuce is intolerant of hot weather, readily bolting or sending up a flower stalk under hot summer conditions. For this reason, plus the long growing period required, it is the most difficult of the lettuces to grow in the home garden locally.

The butterhead types have smaller, softer heads of loosely folded leaves. The outer leaves may be green or brownish with cream or butter colored inner leaves. There are several cultivars available, which will do well in Ohio gardens.

Leaf lettuce has an open growth and does not form a head. Leaf form and color varies considerably. Some cultivars are frilled and crinkled and others deeply lobed. Color ranges from light green to red and bronze. Leaf lettuce matures quickly and is the easiest to grow.

Romaine or cos lettuces form upright, cylindrical heads of tightly folded leaves. The plants may reach up to 10 inches in height. The outer leaves are medium green with greenish white inner leaves. This is the sweeter of the four types.

When to plant

Leaf, Cos and Butterhead lettuce can be planted anytime in the spring when the soil is dry enough to rake the surface. Two or more successive plantings at 10 to 14 day intervals provide a continuous supply of lettuce. Lettuce does not withstand hot summer days well and spring planting should be completed at least a month before the really hot days of early summer begin. Plantings started in late summer mature during cool fall weather. Watering is essential for seed germination and establishment of seedlings. Some shade may also benefit summer sowings. Heat-tolerant varieties (mainly loose-leaf types) may be grown in the shade of taller crops through most of the summer if extra care is taken about irrigation and soil selection.

Head lettuce must be transplanted in most locations and requires more care than other types of lettuce. Start transplants for a spring crop indoors or in a cold frame and set them in the garden as early in the spring as the weather settles. Harden transplants outdoors so that they become acclimated to the conditions under which they will be grown, but do not allow growth to stop entirely. Cos, butterhead and leaf varieties also can be transplanted for earlier harvest. In the heat of summer, lettuce seedlings started in a protected location in the shade can be transplanted later into moderate sites for some limited success.

Spacing

Fertilizer and lime recommendations should be based on the results of a soil test. Contact your local Cooperative Extension office for information on soil testing. As a general rule, however, apply and work into the soil three to four pounds of 5-10-10 fertilizer per 100 square feet of garden area.

Seed may be sown in single rows or broadcast for wide row planting. Wide rows should be 12 to 15 inches across. Cover the seeds with 1/4 to 1/2 inch of soil. Water carefully but thoroughly. Several successive plantings of leaf lettuce will provide a more continuous harvest throughout the growing season. Leave 18 inches between the rows for leaf lettuce, and 24 inches for the other types. To achieve proper spacing of plants, thinning of lettuce seedlings is usually necessary. Thin plants of leaf lettuce four to six inches or

Care

Because lettuce has shallow roots, it should be hoed or cultivated carefully. Frequent light watering causes the leaves to develop rapidly, resulting in high-quality lettuce. Overwatering, especially in heavy soils, can lead to disease, soft growth and scalding or burning of the leaf margins. Organic mulches can help moderate soil temperature and the microenvironment to produce quality lettuce in less than ideal weather conditions.

Harvesting

Leaf lettuce may be cut whenever it is large enough to use. Cutting every other plant at ground level gives the remaining plants more space for growth. Leaf lettuce reaches maximum size (6 to 12 ounces) in 50 to 60 days. Butterhead varieties form small, loose heads that weigh 4 to 8 ounces at harvest (60 to 70 days). The innermost leaves, that tend to blanch themselves, are a delicacy. Cos varieties have an upright growth habit and form a long, medium-dense head.

To store lettuce, wash, drip dry and place in a plastic bag in the refrigerator. Lettuce keeps best at 32°F and high (96%) humidity.

Common Problems

Aphids — Watch for buildup of colonies of aphids on the undersides of the leaves. .

Tipburn is a physiological condition that causes lettuce to "die back" at the edges of the leaves. It results from a change in the moisture relationship between the soil and the plant. Clip off any brown leaf tissue and use the remainder of the leaf. Frequent light watering helps to prevent tipburn. Some varieties are resistant to this condition.

Foliage rots can be a problem, especially in hot or wet seasons. Providing good soil and air drainage for the lettuce bed can help to minimize damage in most years.

RECOMMENDED VARIETIES

Green Leaf

Black-seeded Simpson (earliest to harvest)

Grand Rapids (frilly edges; good for coldframes, greenhouse, garden)

Oak Leaf (resistant to tipburn; good for hot weather)

ButterCrunch (sweet and slow to bolt)

Red Leaf

Red Fire (ruffles with red edge; slow to bolt)

Red Sails (slowest bolting red leaf lettuce)

Ruby (darkest red of all; resistant to tipburn)

Cos or Romaine

Cimmaron (unique, dark red leaf, Cos type)

Green Towers (early; dark green, large leaves)

Paris Island (long-standing)

Heading or Crisphead

Great Lakes (standard, holds well in warm weather)

Iceburg (medium, size, tender hearts; leaf edges tinged light brown)

Ithaca (tolerates heat; resists bitterness; slow to bolt)