

LETTUCE

Gardening tips provided by
Jefferson Farm & Gardens



Overview

Lettuce, *Lactuca sativa*, is a cool season vegetable of the aster family and is related to sunflowers and globe artichokes. Lettuce was one of the first crops that Christopher Columbus brought with him on his voyages to the New World. It then became a popular vegetable for the home garden. Lettuce is high in iron and beta carotene.

Choosing Varieties

There are many varieties of lettuce available that differ in days till maturity, color, growth habit, heat tolerance as well as other traits. There are four types of lettuce that are commonly grown in the home garden. The crisphead types form large, firm heads and include the iceberg lettuce common in grocery stores. Due to the long, cool growing season required by crisphead types, they are not recommended for Missouri's climate. Butterhead types form small heads of tender, wavy leaves. The "leaf" type forms a loose rosette of leaves with a variety of colors and shapes. Romaine type forms an upright, loose bunch of leaves. A few recommended varieties for Missouri and other Midwest states are:

Butterhead

- Buttercrunch (heat tolerant)
- Deer Tongue (slow to bolt, compact plant)

Leaf

- Black Seeded Simpson (early)
- Oak Leaf (oak-shaped leaves, heat tolerant)

Romaine

- Jericho (heat tolerant)
- Red Rosie (red leaves)

It is recommended to try a few varieties to determine overall plant performance and personal preference.

Planting Tips

Lettuce is a cool season vegetable that can withstand a light freeze. It can be spring or fall planted.

In Missouri, seeds can be sown in mid-March to mid-April for a spring crop or in early August for a fall crop. Seeds should be planted about ¼ inch deep in rows that are about 12 inches apart for leaf lettuce and about 24 inches apart for butterhead and romaine types. Planting in a raised bed or row can help maintain higher-quality greens by improving drainage.

Romaine and butterhead types need more space than the leaf lettuce and should be thinned to a spacing of 6-8 inches. Sowing instructions for a particular variety can usually be found on the seed packet. To extend the harvesting season of lettuce, stagger plantings at 10 to 14-day intervals.

Soil Fertility and Pest Control

Lettuce seeds should be planted in well-drained soils without large clods to promote seed/soil contact. Lettuce benefits from the addition of nutrients either in the form of a complete fertilizer or aged compost.

To prevent weeds, retain moisture, and to keep soil temperatures down, mulch can be applied around the plants. Lettuce plants should be given enough water to sustain vigorous growth without waterlogging the soil.

Aphids can also cause damage to lettuce and can be controlled with insecticidal soaps (be sure to follow product labels). Tipburn occurs as brown edges on lettuce leaves, which causes only cosmetic damage. To prevent tipburn, keep lettuce watered and shade if necessary in warm weather. Foliage rots can be prevented by planting in raised beds that allow air flow and water drainage.

Harvesting

Lettuce can be harvested as soon as the leaves are large enough to use. Outer individual leaves can be cut or the entire plant can be harvested. Cut leaf lettuce plants 1 inch above the soil line to encourage the plant to regrow. If the plant starts to produce a seedstalk, the leaves should be harvested immediately to prevent a bitter taste.

Seed Sources

Seeds can be ordered from mail order companies via phone or website. Burpee Seeds (1-800-888-1447, burpee.com) and Johnny's Selected Seeds (1-877-564-6697, johnnyseeds.com) are two companies that sell lettuce varieties.

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