



Growing Leaf Lettuce

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It may be cold and rainy outside, but any day now there will be a break in the weather with sunny days. That's the time to start some spring vegetables like peas and leaf lettuce. Leaf lettuce is one of the easiest winter/spring vegetables to grow and, unlike many garden veggies, it thrives in the cooler, moist season in the foothills. It is very fast growing and when harvested and properly stored in your refrigerator, it is long lasting and very nutritious.

Raised beds are ideal for growing lettuce, but it will do just as well in containers too. Those shallow bowls are perfect for growing a wide variety of leaf lettuces. Start with a good potting mix. This time of year you can place the container where it will get full sun, at least six hours of sunlight.

Amend the soil in your raised beds with good quality compost. Follow the instructions on the seed packet, but, generally, lettuce seeds are planted at a depth of a $\frac{1}{4}$ inch. If it's raining, no need to water. As the seeds germinate and grow, thin the seedlings. The thinnings make a great salad too. To give your lettuce plants the best start, cover the bed with row cover. For lettuce it serves two purposes: the row cover helps retain the warmth from the day's sunlight and it also keeps birds and other critters off the leaves.

Plan your planting area so that you can successively start another row or two of seeds every three weeks. This will assure a continuous supply of lettuce well into the summer season. Once the lettuce sprouts, give the plants a dose of fish emulsion diluted according to label directions use nitrogen fertilizer. Weed carefully as lettuce is very shallowly rooted. Irrigate lightly and frequently as needed. Mulching with straw will help retain moisture and keep the leaves clean and off the ground, thereby reducing the amount of soil debris that will have to be washed off after harvest.

As the weather warms, lettuce will bolt or begin to flower. When the leaves start to taste bitter, you'll know the plant has bolted and will go to seed. Pull and compost these plants out to make room for a new crop.

Some of the best varieties are Black Seeded Simpson, Red and Green Salad Bowl, and Rouge d'Hiver. Look for blends or mixes that offer a variety of lettuce types in one seed packet. There are many mesclun mixes that produce leaves with interesting shapes and spicy flavors. Most of leaf lettuce varieties mature in 35 to 50 days, but often you can begin harvesting before the maturity date or just as soon as the outer leaves are a few inches tall. To harvest, simply take a clean pair of scissors and give the plant a "haircut" by snipping off the outer leaves. Harvest the leaves early in the day and often to promote continual growth. Nothing says "salad" like home-grown leaf lettuce!

Learn more about propagating from seed and other helpful gardening hints at the Saturday, January 19th Master Gardener Top 20 Gardening Hints class. There is no charge for this three-hour event. It starts at 9:00 a.m. and is held in the Veterans Memorial Building, 130 Placerville Dr. in Placerville.

Master Gardeners are available to answer citrus and home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome. The office is located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at http://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at <http://ucanr.edu/mgenews/>. You can also find us on Facebook.