

SEASONAL SALADS

Charles Dowding suggests ways to keep the salad bowl brimming through the year, with tips for sowing, spacing and harvesting leaves. Photography by Tim Sandall

GROWING LEAVES FOR SALADS holds exciting possibilities for home gardeners, but it is not always appreciated that salad plants have specific seasons when they grow most healthily and abundantly. By considering what to grow when and where, a year-long supply of salad leaves can be harvested to provide fresh and interesting ingredients for culinary use.

To begin with, avoid sowing plants at the beginning of their flowering season. For instance, while it is possible to sow Oriental leaves, chicories and endives in April, there is not much point in doing so because spring is their season of flowering. To have leaves rather than flowers, sow them after the longest day has passed.

Lettuce, by contrast, is the other way round (flowering in autumn), so its leaves are most abundant and in best condition in spring and summer. Each salad-leaf plant has an ideal range of sowing dates, which ensure higher quality leaves over a longer stretch of time.

Bear in mind, too, that leaf growth has different qualities in each season, in terms of size, colour, flavour and speed of regrowth, which means that consideration must be given as to how, and when, leaves are picked. Careful picking of outer and larger leaves, on all plants including lettuce and endive, makes it possible to sow less often. You are also more likely to have leaves for longer through the year.

Salad leaves can also be cut, usually from thickly sown rows but this reduces their life compared to picking. I give all salad plants 20–23cm (8–9in) of space in all directions so their roots can find plenty of moisture and nutrients over long periods, and each plant is then picked individually (see *The Garden*, March 2006, pp198–201).

Growing a variety of salad leaves outdoors is hugely rewarding, and relatively simple. The decision is what to grow – and when. ■

Charles Dowding, author and speaker, grows salad and vegetables in Somerset

SPRING

Harvest: April to June.

Sow: Feb–Mar indoors, Mar–May out.

Description: this combination of lettuce, wild rocket, spinach, pea shoots, chives and sorrel is a tasty sample of the fresh new growth of spring with its increasing range of leaves to eat.

Lettuce: as spring unfolds, the choice of cultivars expands to those with more numerous, colourful and thicker leaves. Individual outer leaves of cos (green 'Chartwell' and red 'Rosemoor') and Batavian types (such as 'Red Grenoble') can be harvested as soon as plants are touching; space 20 x 20cm (8in) apart. Sow in February in unheated glasshouse, for planting out in early April. Using a fleece or cloche will bring forward the harvest.

Spinach: sow 'Tarp' F₁ outdoors in late March (or earlier indoors). You could also sow 'Toscane' F₁ which flowers much later than other cultivars and has lovely dark leaves.

Pea shoots: sow seed of a tall cultivar (such as 'Sugar Tall White') at 10 x 10cm (4in) and then pinch out about 9cm (3in) of its main shoot when plants are 30cm (1ft) high: the stem and leaves are tender, with an early taste of pea. Regrowth takes a while, then suddenly you should have plenty of new shoots from each stem. Keep picking before flowers develop, over two months.

Sorrel: this has a delicious flavour as long as leaves are picked regularly when still small; large leaved types are good. Although grown as a perennial, it can also be sown in March for leaves by May.

Wild rocket: any overwintered rocket can continue to produce leaves until July.



SUMMER

Harvest: May to August.

Sow: May–July outdoors.

Description: leaves grow quickly through summer, which means that frequent picking of fewer plants can provide plenty to eat. Many types of lettuce, punctuated with endive, sorrel and Oriental leaves later in summer, are key ingredients. Yet many people run short of leaves in August because of forgetting to do at least one more sowing of lettuce in late May or early June. This sowing, with plants given space and picked as in spring, can provide lettuce leaves from mid-July to the end of September.

Endive, chicory and Oriental leaves: after the solstice in late June, sow endive ('Frenzy') and chicory (long-leaved 'Trevise' or rounded-leaved 'Rossa di Chioggia'); for Oriental leaves (such as mizuna or mustards) it is best to sow in early August (to avoid bolting and pest damage). All three types grow reliably and suffer much less mildew in autumn than lettuce. It is possible to pick or cut them regularly for leaves, over a long period when done carefully; there is also a great choice of colours and leaf shapes now available.

Herbs: some highly aromatic tastes of summer come from herbs such as basil, of which my favourite is lime basil (*Ocimum x citriodorum* 'Lime') which has a citrus flavour and aroma to bowls of leaves. Sow indoors in April, planting out 15–20cm (6–9in) apart. Gorgeous colours are also possible, for instance from small leaves of red amaranth 'Garnef', and from tree spinach (*Chenopodium giganteum*) – I grow just one plant from a March sowing, picked frequently for its magenta-tipped sideshoots, until it flowers in September. It grows to 1.8m (6ft).



AUTUMN

Harvest: October to December.

Sow: July to early September outdoors.

Description: autumn is an abundant time for leaves of all kinds – bitter endive and chicory, Oriental leaves and herbs – at least until the first hard frost. Although leaves decrease in size throughout this season, they continue to be numerous even in November from well-established plants for as long as the weather stays reasonably mild.

Lettuce alternatives: outdoor lettuce suffers from mildew in autumn and lacks vigour. There are plenty of alternatives, however, thanks to salad rocket ('Apollo' or 'Victoria'), leaf radish ('Sai Sai'), purple mizuna and mustards. An excellent mustard to sow in August is 'Red Frills', whose feathery leaves turn dark red in colder weather. It is less pungent than 'Red Giant' or 'Green in the Snow'.

Corn salad (lamb's lettuce): as there is little new growth by December, it pays to have well-grown plants of corn salad – 'Coquille de Louviers' is good. Sow in late August or early September and it should survive almost all winter weather.

Hearted chicories and Chinese cabbage: quantities, colours and tastes can be increased by using these vegetables; 'Rossa di Chioggia' and 'Blues' F₁ respectively are good.

Curly (scarole or frisée) endive: can be sown as late as mid-August and should develop beautiful large hearts until any hard frost. They can also be picked continually for leaves; they grow a surprising amount in November.

● **Indoor growing:** it is useful to augment outdoor leaves after mid-November. For instance, 'Red Grenoble' lettuce sown indoors in early September will crop by November and should then continue until the following June.



WINTER

Harvest: January to March.

Sow: August to September outdoors.

Description: the low yield of winter salad means more plants are needed than in other seasons. Their sowing and planting dates follow nicely after summer vegetables finish. Outdoor leaves in winter are small and scarce, with cold winters sustaining little new growth, so the salad bowl is filled rarely and irregularly until after about mid-March, when the tempo picks up.

Essential ingredients: through any prolonged spells of mild weather, lamb's lettuce, land cress and winter purslane grow slowly and surely, while rocket, mizuna, mustards, leaf chicory, kale and spinach also contribute. But leaf quality is often poor, with mud splashed onto ground-hugging leaves. Cloches offer great possibilities as long as plants are established by about the end of September, from sowings in late August.

● **Indoor growing:** leaves grown under cover (in soil or containers) are larger, healthier and more abundant by late February and March. There is a huge range of plants for indoor salads and carefully picked plants should give leaves for almost half a year, until at least April. For more, see online (below).

@ **Do you have room to grow salad leaves in your glasshouse?** If so, read Charles Dowding's tips for growing leaves indoors. Visit: www.rhs.org.uk/thegarden

i **Further reading** *The RHS Allotment Handbook*, Mitchell Beazley, March 2010, ISBN 9781845335397, £16.99 **RHS Price £13.99**
● *Salad Leaves for all Seasons*, Charles Dowding, Green Books, 2008, ISBN 9781900322201, £10.95

i **Suppliers** www.seedsofitaly.co.uk (020 8427 5020); www.tozerseedsdirect.com (0845 430 1615); www.realseeds.co.uk (01239 821107)