

Leafy Prospects: Know When To Plant Lettuce

Leimone Waite, Master Gardener, March 2, 2019

Q: I would like to grow lettuce. When the best time to plant and are there better varieties for this area?

A: Lettuce can easily be grown during the fall and spring here in the Redding area as long as you use some season extension techniques to protect it from frost: Floating row cover, wall of water, etc. Lettuce doesn't do well here in the summer, even heat-tolerant varieties. It can turn bitter unless you're up in the higher elevations where it's a bit cooler.

There are three main types of lettuce: Head lettuces like Iceberg and Butterhead, Romaine or Cos types, and leaf lettuces. I recommend growing leaf lettuce for three of reasons:

1. I think they're the easiest type to grow, so regardless of how in experienced a gardener you are, you should have a successful crop.
2. Leaf lettuce produces more than one harvest. The leaves can be picked as the plant is growing and the lettuce will regrow.
3. If the weather turns hot early, the lettuce can be harvested and used as baby greens.



Romaine lettuce (Photo: Robert Anglen/The Republic)

Leaf lettuce varieties have loosely formed heads with green, red, purple leaves. Many varieties can have a combination of these colors. There are many varieties of leaf lettuce and gardeners should experiment with these. I've had good experiences with Red Sails, Oak Leaf, Simpson Black Seed, Simpson Elite and Slobolt. I like to grow my lettuce in a container, mixing varieties so there's a mix of color. There are advantages to this method: You can drag it into the garage

if frost is predicted, it can do double duty as a color bowl and it's easier to keep pests such as slugs from eating your crop.

Lettuce are heavy feeders so soil preparation is important to success of the crop, regardless if you plant directly into the garden or in a container. To prepare garden soil for lettuce crops, incorporate 2-4 inches of compost, alfalfa meal or another source of nitrogen and a phosphorus fertilizer such as rock phosphate, bone meal or triple super phosphate into the soil. After incorporating amendments, rake the soil surface to smooth, apply water to settle, allow to dry for a day or so, then rake smooth again and sow seed. Lettuce can be grown from transplants, but I prefer direct seeding as it's much cheaper and plants seem to grow faster.

Lettuce requires regular water. Moisture fluctuations will cause leaves to become tough and/or bitter.

Weather will determine how long it will take for lettuce plants to mature. When temperatures are between 50 and 75 degrees F, lettuce plants can mature as early as 50 days. Cold weather will delay growth. Young lettuce plants can tolerate light frost but older plants will be damaged.

Once lettuce is a few inches tall, plants should be thinned to an 8- to 10-inch spacing. These thinned plants can be eaten as can the individual leaves from growing plants. Make sure to harvest the oldest leaves and not to remove more than a quarter of the leaves on each plant, allowing for regrowth between harvests.

The Shasta Master Gardeners Program can be reached by phone at 242-2219 or email mastergardener@shastacollege.edu. The gardener office is staffed by volunteers trained by the University of California to answer gardeners' questions using information based on scientific research.