Friday’s Feature
By
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Grow a salad this winter by adding lettuce to your garden

Cool days and chilly nights are just the kind of weather lettuce enjoys. Lettuce is a vegetable that is easy to grow and delicious. Some lettuce varieties are also very attractive. So, whether you have a vegetable garden, flower garden or even a garden in containers on a balcony, try including some type of lettuce in your fall plantings.

According to Dan Gill, LSU AgCenter Horticulturist, lettuces were cultivated 3,000 years ago by the Babylonians and possibly earlier by the Chinese. Lettuce seeds were sealed in Egyptian tombs, and lettuces were served to Roman emperors. By 1865 seed companies offered 113 kinds to America’s gardeners. Today lettuce is so popular that new and interesting varieties of lettuce appear in seed catalogs every year.

Although you may read about cultivating lettuce during the summer in northern states, our summer temperatures are too high for lettuce. Lettuce is a cool-season crop here along the Gulf Coast.

Garden lettuces can be divided into three classes based on growth habit—leaf or looseleaf types, semi-heading types such as butterhead and romaine and heading or crisphhead types. Crisphhead lettuces, such as the iceberg types, are more of a challenge to grow here, so it’s recommended that you stay with the leaf and semi-heading cultivars.

Leaf lettuces are the most decorative, least demanding, and among the most heat-tolerant lettuces we can grow. Leaf lettuces are fast maturing and can be ready to begin harvesting just 40 days after planting. Harvesting is best done by cropping the plants regularly. When cropping, only the largest leaves are removed, which allows the plants to continue to grow and produce.

The butterhead lettuces have soft, tender leaves and relatively loose heads. Their fragile leaves make them difficult to ship and pricey at the supermarket. But these delicious butterheads are quite easy to grow. They can be harvested by cropping, or an entire plant may be harvested as the center leaves grow over and form a loose head.
Romaine lettuces are tall, upright and thick-leaved. Their thick midribs and sweet, juicy texture have made them especially prized for salads. The foliage can be red or green, smooth or ruffled.

Lettuce transplants of various types generally are available in area nurseries. You will find a much larger selection of cultivars available from seeds.

Plant lettuce seeds into well-prepared beds that have been amended by digging in a 2-inch layer of organic matter, such as compost, and an all-purpose granular fertilizer. Lettuce seeds need light to germinate, so they are simply pressed or lightly raked into the soil surface. Water frequently until they germinate, and once they come up thin the plants to the appropriate spacing. The average spacing is about 10 inches between plants.

For best quality, lettuce must be encouraged to grow rapidly. This is accomplished by keeping the plants well watered and fertilized. Water thoroughly during dry weather, and keep the plants mulched to prevent drought stress. Stress from drought, heat or low fertility encourages the lettuce to become bitter.

Even though lettuce is best grown here in the winter, hard freezes can damage the foliage. If temperatures in the mid-20s or lower are predicted, throw a layer of pine straw or sheets of fabric over the plants to prevent frost burn.

Looseleaf lettuce is best harvested by cropping. Butterhead can be harvested by cropping or cutting the entire plant, and romaine is best if the entire plant is harvested when ready. All lettuce should be harvested by early to mid-May, since high temperatures will cause the lettuce to become increasingly bitter and to bolt (send up a flower stalk).

Its beauty, ease of culture and delicious foliage make lettuce an excellent choice for any gardener.

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