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# How to Grow Lettuce: The Complete Guide



Photo Credit: Zoranm/GettyImages

Botanical Name: *Lactuca sativa*

Plant Type: Vegetable

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# Planting, Growing, and Harvesting Lettuce

By [Catherine Boeckmann](#)

Last Updated: April 24, 2025



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If you haven't tasted fresh, homegrown lettuce, you're missing out. It's far superior to the store-bought alternative in both taste and vitamin A content. We'll show you how to sow, plant, care for, and harvest this versatile salad vegetable.

Lettuce is quick-growing, fuss-free, and can be grown just about anywhere. Grown for its luscious leaves, there's a cornucopia of both hearting and loose-leaf varieties to explore.

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## About Lettuce

Lettuce needs little introduction. Grown for its luscious leaves, there's a cornucopia of both hearting and loose-leaf varieties to explore. Lettuces that form dense heads for harvesting whole include creamy butterhead types, upright romaine and cos lettuces, and the classic, crunchy iceberg. Looseleaf lettuces can be harvested whole or a few

leaves at a time, 'cut-and-come-again'-style. Choose from the classic salad bowl lettuce, handsome oakleaf types, or any number of other colorful leaves that'll brighten vegetable beds and ornamental borders alike.

Lettuce is a cool-season crop growing well in most regions in the spring and fall. This crop is perfect for beginners; it's easily sown by seed directly in the soil as soon as the ground can be worked. Because lettuce grows quickly, the best approach is to plant a small amount of seeds at a time, staggering the plantings.

Lettuces are a great leafy green because they grow quickly, produce for a long time, and are not very demanding if you keep the plants sufficiently watered. Plus, lettuce grows great in raised beds, making it ideal for small spaces. Lettuces are perfect for containers, which can be placed on decks, patios, balconies, and porches.

**See these clever tips and tricks for seeding lettuce from expert vegetable gardener Ben!**

...w Perfect Lettuce Every Time



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- [Five Fresh Greens to Grow All Year Round](#)
- [Grow Your Own Salads Indoors All Winter](#)
- [You Can Do It! The 10 Easiest Vegetables to Grow From Seed](#)

## PLANTING

Lettuce prefers a location with 5 to 6 hours of sun, but can benefit from afternoon shade when temperatures soar. Soil should be loose, well-draining, and moist but not soggy. In the weeks prior to planting, amend with plenty of compost for added fertility.

Or grow lettuces in pots or tubs of potting soil. Lettuce prefers a bright, open position with good air circulation to promote strong, disease-free growth.

Lettuce is a cool-season crop, so in hot climates, you may get better results growing it in a cooler, shadier spot, especially as the young plants start out. Either way, lettuces don't take long to reach maturity, which makes them an excellent choice for growing in between slower-to-establish crops such as corn or leeks.

## When to Plant Lettuce

- Soil temperatures between 45°F and 65°F (7°C and 18°C) are ideal. Cold-adapted varieties can survive much lower temperatures.
- Make the earliest sowings under cover from late winter to grow on in greenhouse or hoop house beds for a super-early harvest. Then,

from early spring, it's time to sow for growing outside.

- Direct sowing is recommended. Sow seeds in the ground 2 to 4 weeks before your last spring [frost date](#) or as soon as the ground can be worked.
- Or, to get a head start, start seeds indoors about 1 month before your last spring frost date. Harden off seedlings for 3 days to a week before setting outdoors.
- If you are buying transplants (small plants) from a garden center or nursery, you may plant between 2 weeks before your last spring frost to 2 weeks after your last spring frost.
- In most regions, it's possible to plant another crop of lettuce in the fall or even early winter. See our [Planting Calendar](#) for planting dates.
  - **Tip:** To plant a fall crop, create cool soil in late August by moistening the ground and covering it with a bale of straw.

A week later, the soil under the bale will be about 10°F (6°C) cooler than the rest of the garden. Sow a three-foot row of lettuce seeds every couple of weeks—rotate the straw bale around the garden.

## How to Plant Lettuce

- Sowings may be made directly into prepared soil or into module trays of multipurpose potting soil. To sow directly, remove any weeds, then rake the soil level to a fine, crumbly texture. Mark out shallow drills, 8 to 12 inches or 20 to 30cm apart, using a string line as a guide if this helps. Then, sow the tiny seeds in clusters—a pinch of seeds every four inches or 10cm. Backfill the seed drills, label with the variety and water.



- Since the seed is so small, a well-tilled seedbed is essential. Stones and large clods of dirt will inhibit germination.
- Plant seeds 1/8 to 1/4 of an inch deep. Lettuce seeds need light to germinate, so don't sow them too deep.
- Seeds may be sown in single rows or broadcast for wide-row planting (loose-leaf varieties are best for this). When broadcasting, thin 1- to 2-inch tall seedlings for the proper spacing.
- Spacing between plants depends on the variety:
  - *Loose-leaf lettuce*: Plant or thin to 4 inches apart.
  - *Romaine (cos) and butterhead (loose-head, Bibb, Boston) lettuce*: Plant or thin to 8 inches apart.
  - *Crisphead (iceberg) lettuce*: Plant or thin to 16 inches apart.
- Set rows of lettuce 12 to 15 inches apart.

- Sow additional seeds every 2 weeks for a continuous harvest.
- Consider planting rows of chives or garlic between your lettuce to control aphids. They act as “barrier plants” for the lettuce.
- Water thoroughly with a mist nozzle at the time of transplanting or seeding.

For a fall crop, cool the soil in August by moistening it and covering it with a bale of straw. One week later, the soil under the bale should be a few degrees cooler than the rest of the garden and ready to be sown with a 2-foot row of lettuce. Repeat the process every couple of weeks by rotating the straw bale around the garden. As autumn temperatures decline, seed as usual for a fall harvest.

*Photo*  
*credit: Bentaboe/GettyImages*

## GROWING

You can help transplants along at the start of the season by covering them with a temporary cloche made from bottomless milk cartons or plastic bottles. These will keep the chill off your seedlings just enough to help them acclimatize. Newly planted lettuces may also be helped with a simple row cover or fleece.

- Fertilize 3 weeks after transplanting with organic alfalfa meal or another slow-release fertilizer to provide a steady stream of nitrogen.
- Make sure the soil remains moist but not overly wet. It should drain well. Overwatering leads to disease or soft growth.
- Lettuce will tell you when it needs water. Just look at it. If the leaves are wilting, sprinkle them anytime, even in the heat of the day, to cool

them off and slow down the transpiration rate. Using row covers can also help to keep lettuce from drying out in the sun.

- An organic mulch will help conserve moisture, suppress weeds, and keep soil temperatures cool throughout the warmer months.
- Weed by hand if necessary, but be careful of damaging your lettuce plants' shallow roots.

## Growing Lettuce in Containers

When you grow salad greens in containers, it can be different every day, as there are dozens of lettuce varieties along with other leafy edibles. What's more, greens can grow in as little as 6 inches of soil! Some greens can be harvested in as little as a month's time, and cut-and-come-again plants keep producing, often for weeks! In fact, the hardest part of "salad bowl gardening" may be deciding what to grow.

Choose a container that is 6 to 12 inches deep; a diameter of 18 inches is recommended. (Greater depth allows more room for roots and keeps the soil from drying out.) Moisten (do not soak) a portion of good-quality potting mix that is enough to fill your container to within an inch of the top. Direct-sow seeds densely—about 1/2 inch apart—on the prepared mix. Then cover with about 1/4 inch of dry potting mix, sprinkling it around. Tamp, or press, the seeds gently (a flat surface is recommended) so that they make contact with the soil and to keep them from blowing away. Water gently (a hand-held pump container is advised instead of a hose, the water force from which can displace the cover soil and seeds). Keep the seedbed moist. (You can assess the wetness of the container by lifting it, as it will be lighter when dry.)

When seedlings are 4 to 6 inches tall, apply a balanced fertilizer at half strength. Continue watering as needed. Apply diluted fertilizer every 2

weeks, or per package directions.

Protect greens from afternoon sun, if necessary and especially in summer, with shade cloth or row cover or by moving containers into shade. Plant more seeds in other containers every 2 to 4 weeks to maintain a fresh crop.

## How to Delay Bolting

- Bolting is a common problem caused by warm temperatures (over 70°F/20°C) or changes in day length. When a lettuce plant bolts, it starts to produce a central stem and seed stalk, and leaves take on a bitter flavor.
- To delay bolting, cover plants with a shade cloth so that they get filtered light. Be sure to maintain watering throughout the warmest parts of the growing season, too.
- Planning your garden so that lettuce will be in the shade of taller plants, such as tomatoes or sweet corn, may reduce bolting in the heat of the summer.

*Lettuce is a great candidate for  
cold-frame gardening!*

## Types

Some of our favorite varieties include:

- **Crisphead:** ‘Great Lakes’, ‘Ithaca’,  
‘King Crown’,  
‘Mission’, ‘Summertime’
- **Romaine**  
**(Cos)/Butterhead:** ‘Burpee Bibb’,  
‘Cosmo Savoy’, ‘Green Towers’,  
‘Little Gem’, ‘Paris White Cos’,  
‘Parris Island’, ‘Valmaine’
- **Loose-Leaf:** ‘Black Seeded Simpson’,  
‘Green Ice’, ‘Ibis’, ‘Lollo Rossa’, ‘Oak  
Leaf’, ‘Prizehead’, ‘Salad  
Bowl’, ‘Slobolt’
- **Red Leaf:** ‘New Red Fire’, ‘Red Sails’,  
‘Ruby Red’ (Not recommended for  
hot weather areas; the red pigment  
absorbs more heat.)

...But there are so many more types of lettuce to explore! What are your favorites?

*Photo credit: Twing/GettyImages*

## HARVESTING

Harvest lettuce in the morning when full-size but young and tender. Check your garden every day for ready-to-harvest leaves; mature lettuce gets bitter and woody and will go bad quickly.

- Before maturity, you can harvest leaf lettuce by simply removing the outer leaves so that the center leaves can continue to grow.
- Harvest butterhead, romaine, and loose-leaf types by removing the



outer leaves, digging up the whole plant, or cutting the plant about an inch above the soil surface. A second harvest is often possible when using the first or third methods.

- Enjoy your lettuces over a longer period by cutting just a few leaves from each plant at a time. Called cut-and-come-again harvesting, harvesting like this not only prolongs the cropping period—so individual plants crop for anywhere up to two months—it will also give you many more leaves in total. Cut or twist the leaves from the stem, taking care not to damage it. Leave the central leaves untouched to grow on for the next cut.
- Crisphead lettuce is picked when the center is firm.

## How to Store Lettuce

- Store lettuce in a loose plastic bag in the refrigerator for up to 10 days.
- When ready to use, put the harvested lettuce in cold water for a few minutes. Then, place in a salad

spinner or towel. Spin the spinner to remove water from the lettuce.

- Lettuce leaves wilted? Put the leaves in a bowl of cold water with ice cubes and soak for about 15 minutes.

**Ready to see how it's done? Check out this video demo on growing lettuce!**

...ttuce from Sowing to Harvest



## GARDENING PRODUCTS





PESTS/DISEASES

Lettuce Pests and Diseases

| Pest/Disease    | Type   | Symptoms                                                                                 | Control/Prevention                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|-----------------|--------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <u>Aphids</u>   | Insect | Misshapen/yellow leaves; sticky “honeydew” (excrement); sooty, black mold                | Grow <u>companion plants</u> ; knock off with water spray; apply insecticidal soap; put banana or orange peels around plants; wipe leaves with a 1 to 2 percent solution of dish soap (no additives) and water every 2 to 3 days for 2 weeks; add native plants to invite beneficial insects |
| <u>Cutworms</u> | Insect | Wilting; severed stems of seedlings and transplants just above or below soil line; whole | Handpick; in spring before planting, cultivate soil to reduce larvae; wrap a 4-inch-wide collar made from cardboard or                                                                                                                                                                       |

| Pest/Disease                       | Type   | Symptoms                                                                                                                                               | Control/Prevention                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|------------------------------------|--------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                    |        | seedlings disappear                                                                                                                                    | newspaper around each stem, sinking 2 inches into soil; weed; use row covers; destroy crop residue                                                                                                  |
| <b><u>Earwigs</u></b>              | Insect | Many small holes in leaves/stems                                                                                                                       | Create an <a href="#"><u>earwig trap</u></a> by placing a tuna can filled with 1/2 inch of fish oil and sinking it into the soil such that edge is slightly above ground level; remove plant debris |
| <b><u>Lettuce mosaic virus</u></b> | Virus  | Leaves may show green mottling or brown spots and can be distorted, blistered, curled backward; plants stunted; heads may be distorted or fail to form | Destroy infected plants; choose resistant varieties and certified virus-free seed; use row covers; disinfect garden tools; weed; control aphids                                                     |
| <b><u>Powdery mildew</u></b>       | Fungus | White spots on upper leaf surfaces expand to flour-like coating                                                                                        | Destroy infected leaves on plants; choose resistant varieties; plant in                                                                                                                             |

| Pest/Disease        | Type    | Symptoms                                                                         | Control/Prevention                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|---------------------|---------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                     |         | over entire leaves; foliage may yellow/die; distortion/stunting of leaves        | full sun, if possible; ensure good air circulation; spray plants with 1 tea-spoon baking soda dissolved in 1 quart water; de-destroy crop residue                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| <u>Slugs/snails</u> | Mollusk | Irregular holes in leaves; slimy secretion on plants/soil; seedlings “disappear” | Handpick; avoid thick bark mulch; use copper plant collars; avoid overhead watering; lay boards on soil in evening, and in morning dispose of “hiding” pests in hot, soapy water; drown in deep container filled with 1/2 inch of beer, or sugar water and yeast, and sunk so that top edge is slightly above ground; apply 1-inch-wide strip of food-grade <u>diatomaceous earth</u> as barrier |

| Pest/Disease             | Type   | Symptoms                                                                                                                                                                                 | Control/Prevention                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|--------------------------|--------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b><u>White mold</u></b> | Fungus | Pale gray, “water-soaked” areas on stems, leaves, and other plant parts that enlarge and develop white, cottony growth, later with black particles; bleached areas; plants wilt/collapse | Destroy infected plants; ensure good air circulation; water in morning; weed; destroy crop residue; rotating crops on 5-year or longer cycle may help                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b><u>Whiteflies</u></b> | Insect | Sticky “honey-dew” (excrement); sooty, black mold; yellow/silver areas on leaves; wilted/stunted plants; distortion; adults fly if disturbed; some species transmit viruses              | Remove infested leaves/plants; use handheld vacuum to remove pests; spray water on leaf undersides in morning/evening to knock off pests; monitor adults with yellow sticky traps; spray with insecticidal soap; invite beneficial insects and hummingbirds with native plants; weed diligently; use reflective mulch |

Also keep an eye out for mammalian pests such as [rabbits](#) and [groundhogs](#)!

## WIT AND WISDOM

- Did you know that lettuce and [sunflowers](#) are relatives? They both belong to the Asteraceae (or “daisy”) family.
- “Lettuce is like conversation; it must be fresh and crisp, so sparkling that you scarcely notice the bitter in it.” –*My Summer in a Garden*, by Charles Dudley Warner, American writer (1829-1900)
- Eating lettuce for dinner can be calming and help to [reduce stress](#).
- Embrace your leafy greens! Learn more about the [health benefits of going green](#) and [how to grow other salad greens in your garden](#)!
- ‘Iceberg’ lettuce got its name when, in the early 1900s, California growers realized that it would “keep” while being transported across the country if it were cov-

ered in crushed ice. Until then, it  
had been called 'Crisphead'.

## RECIPES

**LETTUCE SOUP**

**BEEF AND RICE LETTUCE  
CUPS**

**CHICKEN SALAD WITH BLUE  
CHEESE**

**SEVEN-LAYER SALAD**

**COBB SALAD PLATTER**

## COOKING NOTES

Lettuce makes the perfect base for any number of salads. Try [these eight great salad recipes](#) with your harvest!



**VEGETABLES**

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### Catherine Boeckmann



Catherine Boeckmann loves nature, stargazing, and gardening so it's not surprising that she and The Old Farmer's Almanac found each other. She leads digital content for the Almanac website, and is also a certified master gardener in the state of Indiana. [Read More from Catherine Boeckmann](#)

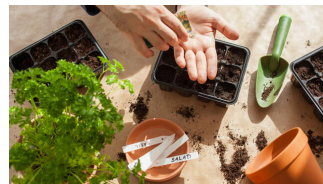
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# COMMENTS

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**Frances Gale (not verified)** 2 years 2 months ago

I have found storing lettuce and celery in tin foil is way, way better than any other method for storage

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REPLY

**Kentoy (not verified)** 2 years 5 months ago

May I know who is the author of the article in lettuce?

REPLY

**Karen (not verified)** 3 years 2 months ago

I have grow lights for the first time and was wondering if I could successfully grow let-

tuce now, inside. It is February 5 here in CT.

Thanks.

REPLY

**Robert (not verified)** 3 years 2 months ago

Yes you can. I am located in southwestern Ontario and grow lettuce and herbs year round under grow lights. Just incorporate an oscillating fan on very low to blow over the plants for about 30-40 mins each day

REPLY

**Karen (not verified)** 3 years 2 months ago

Thank you. I'll try it!

REPLY

---

**Lori (not verified)** 4 years 11 months ago

I bought transplant lettuce at the grocery store (established plants, ready to plant). They did well after I planted them in the planters, and doubled their growth. So, I decided to harvest it. But, I cut almost all of the leaves, including the ones in the center. Did I kill my lettuce plants or will they re-grow? We live in an area in Europe where the weather is between 40's, for lows, and 50's for highs all day....Thank you for your insight!

**REPLY**

**The Editors** 4 years 11 months ago

It depends how you harvested. If you cut off all the leaves with scissor at soil level, it will grow back in a few weeks. You may even get a third cutting. This “cut and come again” method is actually our preferred way to go.

Obviously, if you pulled the whole head or any of the roots, that's it! Seed more lettuce.

REPLY

---

**Saurabh Bhatia (not verified)** 4 years 11 months ago

Everyone has been telling me that Lettuce should be harvested before maturity otherwise it will bolt/ go bitter.

But how do i make out 'before maturity' stage?

is there a rule of thumb, or a day calculation, or size calculation or some signs in leaves etc. to tell me that this is ripe for harvesting but its not yet mature?

REPLY

**The Editors** 4 years 11 months ago

You can start harvesting baby greens when they are 4 to 6 inches in height (about 25-40 days from planting). When you top harvesting is a judgemental call. The leaves will taste bitter and the

plant will look weak and no longer be producing leaves.

How you harvest is up to you. You can use scissors and cut your lettuce off at the soil. And then the plants will produce new leaves from the base and can be harvested a second time in 3 to 4 weeks. Or you can plant so that each head is 4 to 6 inches apart and harvest outer leaves or entire plants.

**REPLY**

---

**Urbankisaan (not verified)** 5 years ago

Lettuce is healthier than you realize. It also provides Vitamin-A and Vitamin-K. It also has small amount of many other healthy nutrients. It is low in fiber and it has high water content.

**REPLY**

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