

The Garden Plot, May 2008

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Some people don't like salad greens. My grandfather, for example, was what Americans call a "meat and potatoes man." He called greens "rabbit food," and if you put a salad on the table when he was about to eat, he would give you a mean look until you took it away. Many people like greens, however, and there are probably evolutionary reasons for this. Leafy green vegetables seem to contain small but important amounts of vitamins, antioxidants, and other compounds that not only help our bodies work well from day to day, but also work over the long term to prevent disease and health problems related to aging.

In the US, salad greens are usually grown as either a salad mix (sometimes called "mesclun" or "baby greens") or as "heads." I'll talk about salad mix first, then heads, and then say a little about washing, storing, and eating greens.

Whether you know it or not, you may already have had salad mix. Many grocery stores now carry tightly sealed plastic bags of small, pre-washed leaves that are ready to eat with no preparation. These bags have a large environmental impact, but they are very convenient for busy people. If you like eating your greens this way (young, soft, and ready to eat whenever you want them), then you might want to grow your own salad mix.

Almost any kind of salad green can be raised for salad mix. Here's a list of some plants I like to grow this way: lettuce (many varieties), endive, radicchio, mizuna (also called kyona), komatsuna, broccoli raab, arugula, mustard, red mustard, Napa cabbage (also called Chinese cabbage), hon tsai tai, tat soi, canola (also called yu choy or edible rape), bok choy (also called pak choy), spinach, amaranth, chard, beets, purslane, sorrel, mâche (also called corn salad), and dandelions. I also grow some herbs, including fennel, parsley, and basil, and add them to salad mix in small amounts.

To grow salad mix, you can either a) buy pre-mixed seeds of many different greens, b) buy seeds of multiple plants, mix them together, and plant one or more rows of the mixed seeds, or c) buy seeds of multiple different greens and plant one or two "pure" rows of each green. Plant the seeds very densely and use a sharp knife to harvest the plants' leaves when they are small (less than 15 cm or 6 in long). If you have grown separate rows of different greens, you can mix the different greens together as you cut them. If you cut the leaves off about 2.5 cm (1 in) above the soil, the plants will often regrow and you can cut them one or two more times before they become too bitter to eat.

A few kinds of greens (especially lettuce, endive, radicchio, bok choy, and Napa cabbage) are also raised for what Americans call heads. To do this, the seeds are planted much farther apart than for salad mix and the plants are allowed to form large, dense masses of leaves. Heads take a longer time to grow than salad mix, but you get more total salad out of a small space as heads than as salad mix. Once you have harvested greens as heads, they will usually not grow back. Note that many greens like spinach never form heads and are always planted more or less as I described for salad mix.

I know that I haven't given you many details about how to grow greens. For these, I encourage you to go to the Eagle Heights Gardens web site and look at a free gardening manual I wrote (see [http://www.eagleheightsgardens.org/tips/garden\\_manual\\_v\\_1.1.pdf](http://www.eagleheightsgardens.org/tips/garden_manual_v_1.1.pdf)). The section on greens has detailed instructions for growing both salad mix and heads.

After harvesting either heads or salad mix, it's important to keep them out of the sun and heat and get them in a refrigerator or cold water as soon as possible. You can wash your greens when you bring them home from the garden, or store them unwashed and wash them just before you eat them. Either way, there are two things that are important to know:

1) Salad mix and heads should always be stored in a tightly closed plastic bag or box together with several folded paper towels. The paper towels will take up water that builds up inside the bag and will make your greens last much longer than they would without the towels.

2) Whenever you wash your greens and however you do it, make sure to dry them very well. A tool called a “salad spinner” is very convenient for both washing and drying greens, and can also be used as a container to store greens in the refrigerator. Salad spinners are cheap (about \$10-15) and available at any store that sells kitchen equipment. When she first saw a salad spinner, my wife (who’s not American) thought that it was yet another stupid American tool made to do something you could do equally well by hand. After using one the first time, however, she was convinced that it was useful.

You may like eating salads with dressing (for example, a mixture of olive oil and vinegar), but I also encourage you to put them in sandwiches and try adding them to cooked dishes like pasta salads after the dish has cooled from cooking. Some greens such as head lettuce can also be used for cooked dishes. Two thousand years ago the Romans used lettuce almost entirely for making soup, and there are many lettuce soup recipes available on the internet.