

# Growing Your Own

## A beginner's guide to gardening

# Lettuce

**L**ettuce is an easy, cool-season vegetable grown in the spring and fall. Fill your garden with a rainbow of lettuce for fresh, low-cost salads.

## Types

Lettuce comes in four types: leaf, butterhead or Bibb, romaine, and crisphead. Most lettuce varieties like cooler weather, but some are more heat tolerant. Lettuce grows in a range of colors, from greens to reds.

**Leaf** is the most common type of lettuce in home gardens. Harvest outer leaves as they grow or cut a whole section of leaves at one time. Leaf varieties include:

- Black Seeded Simpson
- Grand Rapids
- Green Star
- Red Sails
- Royal Oakleaf
- Salad Bowl

**Butterhead** or Bibb types form a head of lettuce with tender, sweet leaves. You can harvest the whole head at once. Bibb varieties include:

- Amish Deer Tongue
- Buttercrunch
- Nancy



Green Star  
*Johnny's Selected Seeds*



Red Sails  
*Johnny's Selected Seeds*



Royal Oakleaf  
*Erika Olsen, University of Kentucky*



Nancy  
*Johnny's Selected Seeds*

**Romaine** lettuces form a tall head. Harvest outer leaves or cut the whole head at once. Romaine varieties include:

- Coastal Star
- Green Towers

**Crisphead** lettuce grows best in weather that is cooler than Kentucky’s typical climate. It is advised not to grow this type in Kentucky. The most common variety is Iceberg.

Heat-tolerant lettuce varieties grow well in temperatures between 60 degrees F and 70 degrees F but may handle temperatures from 80 degrees F to 85 degrees F. Nevada is a heat-tolerant variety.

### How much to plant

For a family of four, plant a 10-foot row of lettuce in a season. This should yield five to 10 pounds of lettuce, or enough for a couple of side salads per week throughout the season. Head-lettuce types need more space and time but yield a heavier harvest at one time. Leaf-lettuce types grow fast, and you can harvest them often. Plant a mixture of lettuce types and repeat planting over a period of weeks to stretch out the harvest.

### How and when to plant

You can plant leaf-lettuce seeds right into garden soil. Head lettuce can be grown from seed or transplants. Use the following chart for planting lettuce.



Coastal Star  
*Johnny's Selected Seeds*

Lettuce seeds are tiny, so plant them about one-eighth inch deep in the soil. Lightly cover seeds with soil so they still receive some light, and gently pat them down to ensure soil contact. Use a spray bottle or misting nozzle to water until seedlings appear.

Lettuce Planting			
	Leaf Lettuce	Head Lettuce	
<b>Rows</b>	8–12 inches apart	15–18 inches apart	
<b>Spacing</b>	20–30 seeds per foot	Transplants 9–12 inches apart	
<b>Safe Planting Dates</b>	<b>Spring</b>	<b>Fall</b>	
Eastern Kentucky	April 1–30	Aug. 1–15	
Central Kentucky	March 25–April 20	Aug. 15–30	
Western Kentucky	March 15–April 15	Sept. 1–15	

Lettuce is a great crop to interplant with other crops. Interplanting is when you put more than one type of plant side by side in the same row. For example, plant lettuce in open pockets around tomato plants. The tomatoes will shade the lettuce, and the lettuce reduces weeds around the tomatoes. The lettuce will be finished by the time the tomatoes mature and crowd them out.

Lettuce also grows well in containers, either inside the house in bright light or outside. Grow lettuce in any container at least eight inches across and four to six inches deep.

## Pests and diseases

Pests may cause lettuce leaves to wilt, curl, wrinkle, or turn yellow. Aphids are small insects that can be black, red, or green and appear in colonies on the leaves and stems of lettuce. Leafhoppers are small, pale green, wedge-shaped insects. Not only do they harm the leaves, but they also spread diseases that may affect the whole plant. Watch for pests. Spray with water to remove small numbers of insects.



Lettuce interplanted between tomato plants

Planting in well-draining soil will reduce some pests, like slugs. Planting in a different part of the garden each year will also help prevent disease problems. Do not plant lettuce in the same place after beans.

If you notice problems with insect damage or disease, see the UK Cooperative Extension publication, Home Vegetable Gardening in Kentucky (ID-128) at <https://publications.ca.uky.edu/id-128> or call your local county Extension office for help with treatment and control.

## Harvesting

To harvest, cut leaves with a serrated knife or scissors, or gently break off by hand. You can harvest leaf lettuce at almost any stage. Cut leaf by leaf or cut a whole section at once. Either way, new leaves will grow from the center. Small, young leaves will be more tender and sweet.



A green lettuce aphid on a lettuce leaf

Whitney Cranshaw, Colorado State University, Bugwood.org, CC BY 3.0



Root rot from damping off. To avoid, plant in well-draining soil.

Gerald Holmes, Strawberry Center, Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, Bugwood.org, CC BY-NC 3.

Harvest head lettuce (romaine or butterhead) by cutting the whole lettuce head at the base or pulling it out of the ground. For butterhead lettuce, look for the leaves to cup inward and form a loose head. Romaine leaves are mature when they have formed a tight head, which will be six to eight inches tall and four inches wide.

Try to harvest every other plant, so the remaining plants will not crowd each other. If you stagger your planting dates over a few weeks, it is likely you will have a steady source of lettuce.

## Storage

After harvest, store lettuce dry in a plastic bag in the refrigerator. If you wash before storage, dry leaves well. Lettuce can last a week or longer, depending on the type. If your lettuce is wilting when you harvest it, place it in cold water to shock it back to being firm, then dry it well.

Lettuce can be hard to clean. Wash lettuce well several times before use. Head lettuce might need to be chopped roughly before cleaning to separate the leaves and remove dirt trapped by outer leaves. Lettuce is eaten raw, so be sure to clean it well before use.

## Clean up

After the season, remove any plants, including their roots. Dispose of diseased plants in the garbage. You can compost healthy plant material.

## Serving

Lettuce has vitamins A and C, calcium, and iron. Enjoy lettuce in your favorite salad or add a fresh crunch to a sandwich. Stuff lettuce leaves with a meat-and-vegetable filling to make Asian lettuce wraps or southwestern-style lettuce “tacos.”



Asian lettuce wraps using butterhead-type leaves

## Summary

### Varieties

Kentucky growers can choose from three types of lettuce: leaf, butterhead or Bibb, and romaine. Lettuce comes in many colors, from green to red. See the first page for a list of popular varieties.

### How much to plant?

A 10-foot row of lettuce should bear five to 10 pounds of harvest. That would make a couple of side salads per week for a few weeks.

### How and when to plant?

Lettuce likes cooler temperatures but is sensitive to frost. You can grow lettuce in spring and again in the fall.

### Pests and diseases

Lettuce is affected by root rot (damping off), aphids, and leafhoppers. Check for pests, plant in well-draining soil, and rotate where you plant it each year.

### Harvesting

You can harvest leaf lettuce continuously. Head lettuces are harvested all at once, cutting off the whole head.

### Serving

Enjoy lettuce fresh in salads, sandwiches, or stuffed with fillings like a wrap.

### Storing

Store dry lettuce in a bag in the refrigerator. It can last a week or more.

### Clean up

Harvest leftover leaves before first frost. Pull out plants and compost or throw them away.

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