

## Yard and Garden – 03-28-09 – Ted Griess / Extension Horticulture Assistant

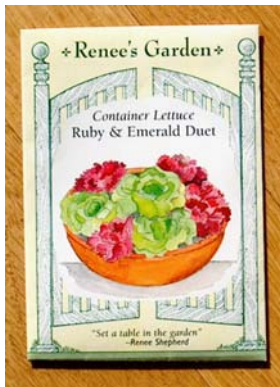
A man goes to the doctor with a piece of lettuce hanging out of his ear. “That looks nasty,” says the doctor. “Nasty,” replies the man. “What you see is just the tip of the iceberg.”

When I was a young boy, mother would frequently serve a lettuce salad at meal time. I’d usually turn up my nose and make some wise crack such as, “No thanks. I don’t care for rabbit food.” Somewhere between 6 and 66, my attitude about lettuce changed.

Lettuce is the basic ingredient in garden salad. Generally, we eat lettuce because it tastes good. Most lettuce is high in nutrients but low in calories. Dieters find lettuce a favorite. One can frequently find lettuce in sandwiches; however, when used in that manner, it serves as decorative value more than food value.

Lettuce is categorized into four groups: crisphead, butterhead, romaine and leaf lettuce. Many varieties exist within each group.

Of the four, crisphead lettuce has been the most commonly sold in grocery stores. The leaves of crisphead lettuce are light green in color and densely packed together in a head. Iceberg is a prime example of head lettuce. It has a crunchy texture due to its high water content and very few calories; however, iceberg has little taste. Of the four groups, crisphead lettuce requires the longest growing season and tolerates heat poorly. Because of these two characteristics, rarely does one see this group grown in home gardens in Nebraska.



Butterhead lettuce is smaller than crisphead. Its leaves are not as tightly packed. Leaves of this group have a smooth light flavor often described as tasting buttery; thus, the name butter-head. Ruby, emerald and bibb are three butterhead varieties. Fifty to sixty-five days are needed to grow most butterhead varieties.

The leaves of romaine lettuce, which are rigid and tightly packed together, grow ten inches or more in height. The outer leaves are dark green, while the inner leaves have less color. Some people consider romaine the most flavorful and nutritious of the four groups. Romaine requires 65 to 75 days of growing time before it is ready to harvest.

Leaf lettuces are the most varied of the lettuce groups. Colors can vary from red to dark green, and the leaves can be straight, ruffled or curly. Leaf lettuce is a favorite of most home gardeners. It grows quickly, in about 30 days, and can be harvested and enjoyed almost daily.

The type of leaf lettuce I most enjoy growing is called Mesclun. Actually, it is not a type but rather a mixture of loose leaf lettuces and greens. *Webster's New World Dictionary* defines mesclun as “a mixture of salad greens and herbs, as Bibb lettuce, with dandelion greens, radicchio and parsley.” The added greens enhance the flavor of the mix.



Most leaf lettuces will grow easily in outdoor containers placed on a deck or patio. Grown in this fashion, they can be ornamental and practical. One needs only to step out the kitchen door to harvest dinner.

All four groups of lettuce grow best in soil kept constantly moist and with air temperatures ranging from 45°F. to 75°F. Since those growing conditions occur mostly in early spring and in the fall, rarely is lettuce grown in the heat of summer. Lettuce is relatively cold tolerant. Direct planting can usually be done two to three weeks before the last expected frost day. That calculates for us somewhere around the third week in April. Prepare the planting bed by tilling the soil to a depth of about ten inches. The seeds of lettuce are small; thus, they need to be planted shallowly and covered lightly.

Seeds typically sprout in two to eight days when air temperatures are in the 50° F. to 70° F. range. As seedlings grow, thin the plants according to the directions on the seed packet. For the sweetest leaves, start cutting as soon as they are large enough to eat. Cut about one inch above the soil line, preferably with a scissors. Older mature leaves become bitter.

Rabbits love lettuce. A fence provides the best protection from these critters. Insect and slugs can also pose a problem. Keep in mind, lettuce is delicate and can easily absorb insecticides, thus posing a threat to humans. Use only those insecticides labeled for the crop and always follow directions.

In this article, I've only touched the tip of the *iceberg* with information about *lettuce*, but, for now, *let us* end this article about *lettuce*.