

A photograph of a garden bed. In the foreground, there are several types of leafy vegetables, including green leaf lettuce, dark green kale, and purple-tinged leafy greens. A wooden planter box in the upper right corner contains several green herbs, likely parsley. The background is a dark, rich soil.

GROWING LEAFY SALAD VEGETABLES

By John Mason and Staff of ACS Distance Education

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CHAPTER 1 DECIDING HOW TO GROW

Vegetable leaves are an important part of the human diet. They are eaten fresh in salads or on sandwiches. They may be preserved (e.g. Sauerkraut) or cooked and eaten as a hot vegetable. Leaves provide a wide range of critical nutrients in the human diet which are generally not found in adequate quantities in other types of food. They also provide fibre which is critically important to the health of the digestive system.

What Leaves are Edible?

While a lot of plants are edible, many of those are not palatable because of taste or texture. A lot of other plant leaves contain toxic chemicals which can upset the human body, cause illness, or cause long-term damage or death.

Every human who eats leaves (i.e. most humans) should know how to differentiate between palatable, edible, nutritionally beneficial leaves and those that are not those things. With some plants, flower petals are also edible. Sometimes flowers are mixed into leafy salads to add colour and to provide different tastes and textures.



A biodiverse garden is less exposed to pest and disease than a monoculture

How to Grow Leaf Vegetables

There are a number of choices to be made about how to grow leaf vegetables:

- Growing medium – soil or soilless medium (i.e. in-ground, in raised garden beds, in containers, or in hydroponics)?
- Monoculture or polyculture (i.e. one species or many species together)?
- Scale – mass planting and production or subsistence/sustainable farming?
- Unprotected or protected growing conditions (e.g. in a greenhouse)
- With or without synthetic pesticides (inorganic or organic)?

Growing In-Ground

It is important to prepare the soil properly prior to planting. The following will help establish the best soil conditions from the outset:

- Thoroughly cultivate the soil and mix in compost to a depth of 15 cm.
- Leave for a week ideally, then test the pH (simple pH test kits are available from your local nursery). The ideal pH for healthy vegetables is between 6 and 8.
- Correct the pH if necessary by incorporating lime or dolomite into the soil to raise pH, or sulphur to lower it.

- Continue cultivation with a fork, cultivator or rake to kill all weeds and produce a fine crumbly textured soil.
- In poor soils it is beneficial to grow and incorporate a cover/green manure crop to improve the soil fertility and structure.

Don't overcrowd plants! Resist the temptation to plant small seedlings too close together as this will result in less than satisfactory growth, even with good soil preparation. Plants starved for space and light will rarely produce a good crop. Spacing is important for sunlight and for root spread. Overcrowding will also reduce ventilation around the plants, making them more susceptible to diseases, such as fungal rots.



Commercial row crop production of lettuce