

Growing your Own Salads

Whether you like your leaves green and crispy, red and frilly or peppery and spicy, growing from seed gives you a much wider choice than you'll find in shop-bought 'pillow packs'. Growing cut-and-come-again salads is fast, too - from sowing to picking takes just six weeks. And by making frequent salad sowings, you'll have regular pickings over many months

How to sow salad leaf seeds

Salad leaves grow well in even poor soils. However, boosting the moisture content by adding plenty of well-rotted organic matter will reduce the risk of crops running to seed in hot, dry summers (which turns the leaves bitter).

Sow seeds in early spring, as soon as the soil is workable, and continue until September (or even longer if you cover plants with a cloche or fleece and choose winter-cropping varieties). Make sowings every two weeks to ensure continuous cropping.

Prepare the seed bed by removing any weeds and stones and raking over the soil to create a fine texture. Next, make shallow drills (straight rows made by pressing a bamboo cane into the soil) about 1cm deep. Water along the drill, taking care not to collapse the sides. Sprinkle a pinch of seeds along the bottom. Cover thinly with soil or compost, and water gently.

You can grow small patches of salad leaves in any gaps in your borders among your flowers and shrubs. They also grow well in pots, boxes, trays and any kind of container. Fill your container with multipurpose compost, to 2cm below the rim, and firm down. Scatter the seeds over the surface, cover lightly with compost and water well.

Good varieties to try are Valmaine and mixed spicy salad leaves.

Valmaine is the pure green lettuce which is very productive and space saving. Early sowings can be harvested in 40 days. You can sow this variety in a container in multipurpose compost 1 cm deep 1/2 inch and covered. The other variety of mixed spicy salad leaves are sown exactly the same way, and is a mixture of cress, wrinkle crinkle, mustard, rocket and Mizuna - this one will really test the taste buds!

For those who don't have a garden or much outside space, there are many kinds of salads, vegetables, and herbs that can be grown on a window sill or on a balcony such as Red Orach and Fennel which are both ideal for salads and Tree Spinach which is especially good for use in stir fries.

Nasturtiums can be used in salads as well as giving colour to the garden and to a room if grown in containers.

Thanks to Graeme Le Marquand from the Jersey Branch of the National Vegetable Society.

