

Specialty Greens Provide for Tasty, Nutritious Salads



March can be a healthy month for home gardeners to get moving; working the soil and planting nutritious, early season specialty greens. Lettuce, one of the most cold-hardy vegetables, can be planted as soon as soil can be worked in the spring, with optimum growth occurring at temperatures of 60 to 65°F.

Many gardeners choose traditional iceberg or crisp head lettuce, but why not experiment with healthier greens this season? Romaine or leaf lettuces, for example, contain more minerals and higher levels of vitamins A and C. Romaine or Cos lettuce develops elongated heads with heavy midribs, while leaf lettuce is a compact rosette of leaves that vary in shapes, margins and color. Both lettuces can range from light green to purple. The soft, buttery textures of butter head types of lettuce make them very popular.

For a different taste, grow a little arugula to add to salads. Arugula leaves give salads a slightly pungent, spicy flavor and should be used sparingly. Younger leaves are milder in taste. Sow cultivated varieties of arugula in early spring in fertile soil. Although mature plants will reach a height of 2 to 3 feet, early tender leaves provide maximum quality. Depending on variety, leaves will range from deeply lobed to strap-like in shape. Sow every 2 to 3 weeks for a continuous harvest of young leaves.

Chopped fennel leaves will also give a slightly licorice or anise flavor to salad, although fennel tastes somewhat nuttier and softer than anise. Leafy or non-bulbing varieties are generally preferred. Stalks can be used like celery or chopped into soups. Plant fennel in rows 18 inches apart. Space seedlings 6 inches apart in each row. Keep the soil moist until after seedlings emerge. As with leaf lettuce and arugula, successive plantings every 2-3 weeks will ensure a plentiful supply of fresh leaves for salads.

Spinach is another popular salad green. Leaves may vary from savoyed or wrinkled to flat in appearance. Spinach is a good source of Vitamin A, calcium, potassium, iron and phosphorous. Garden-grown spinach is also tasty as a cooked green. Other less known crops used for salads include radicchio, a purple-red-colored chicory, and endive, a green with fringed leaves commonly used in Italy and France.

All of these crops taste best when harvested in cool weather and when plants are not stressed for water.

This article adapted from Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service, USDA. Please contact Ken Churches at cdcalaveras@ucdavis.edu or (209) 754-6475 with your agricultural questions. To speak with a Certified Master Gardener: Calaveras (209) 754-2880, Tuolumne (209) 533-5696, Amador (209) 223-6837, El Dorado (530) 621-5543.