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G73-71 Lettuce (Revised April 1990)

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Lettuce

Successfully growing and harvesting lettuce is the focus of this NebGuide.

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Lettuce is an increasingly popular vegetable in the United States. Because it is a basic ingredient in salads, lettuce is eaten more frequently than any other vegetable. Lettuce can be served alone with a variety of dressings or mixed with other fresh vegetables.

Its fresh color and crisp texture serve well as a garnish, and its leaves may be stuffed with fruit, cheese, seafood, poultry, ham, or egg salads. Although usually consumed fresh, leaf lettuce and chopped green onions "wilted" with warm vegetable oil and vinegar make a pleasing, refreshing springtime dish.

Varieties

There are five different types of lettuce: crisp-head, leaf, butterhead, cos or Romaine, and stem.

The **crisp-head varieties** with dense, firm heads and crisp leaves are by far the most important commercial types. Strains of Great Lakes, an All American winner, and Imperial mature about 75 days from planting and withstand warm weather better than other crisp-head varieties.

Black-Seeded Simpson, Early Prizehead, Oak Leaf, Grand Rapids and Ruby Red are **leaf lettuce varieties** that mature about 45 days from planting. In contrast to the bright green leaves of other varieties, Ruby Red, an All American winner, has frilled, glossy red leaves.

Leaf lettuce matures quickly, is easy to grow, and is a good type of lettuce for home gardens.

Butterhead lettuce produces a loose, soft head. The inner leaves have an oily or buttery feel. Butterhead varieties produce high quality lettuce. They mature slightly earlier than crisp-head varieties, and are less tolerant of warm weather.

Big Boston, Bibb, and Buttercrunch, an All American winner, are popular varieties. In Nebraska, butterhead lettuce does best when started early indoors or in cold frames, and transplanted to the garden.

The **cos** or **Romaine** type of lettuce develops an elongated head of stiff, upright leaves about 80 days from planting. Cos lettuce is important in Europe and is gaining popularity in the United States. Paris White and Parris Island are available varieties. Cos lettuce has been more difficult to grow in Nebraska than other types of lettuce.

Stem lettuce often is listed in catalogs under the name of Celtuce (CELery - letTUCE). It is grown for its fleshy, elongated stem in preference to its leaves. The stem is peeled and may be eaten raw like celery, or it may be cooked.

Requirements and Culture

Lettuce germinates and grows at low temperature, and is one of the first vegetables to be planted in the spring. It tolerates a moderate freeze and does best in cool seasons, so in Nebraska lettuce should be planted as an early spring or a fall crop.

Hot weather causes lettuce sap to become milky and bitter. It also causes seed stalks to form, and stops continued leaf growth. Butterhead and crisp-head varieties are particularly sensitive in this regard.

Bolting and bitter flavor that result from high temperatures can be delayed by shading the crop. Row covers, cheesecloth or other shading material can be effective. Selecting a planting site that will be shaded in the afternoon is another alternative.

Conditions in western Nebraska are more favorable for lettuce production than conditions in eastern Nebraska. Suggested periods for planting spring and fall lettuce for different regions in Nebraska are:

	Fall		Spring	
	<i>Earliest</i>	<i>Latest</i>	<i>Earliest</i>	<i>Latest</i>
East	3/25	5/1	7/25	8/5
Central	3/30	5/5	7/20	8/1
West	4/5	5/15	7/15	7/25

If transplants are used for early season production, they should be started indoors or in cold frames about March 10, March 15 or March 20 and then set in the garden about April 15 (east), April 20 (central), and April 25 (west).

A series of plantings 10 to 15 days apart will supply fresh lettuce for an extended period. Lettuce seed should be sown thinly in rows about 1 1/2 to 2 feet apart and covered with 1/2 inch of fine soil.

Leaf lettuce should be thinned to a stand of 3 inches between plants. Allow 6 to 8 inches between Butterhead varieties and 10 to 12 inches between crisp-head varieties. One packet of seed will sow 50 feet; one ounce, 100 feet of row.

An alternative way to grow leafy types of lettuce is in a wide row. Seed can be broadcast thinly and lightly covered with soil in an area 1 to 2 ft. wide and as long as is practical. Following germination, as the seedlings enlarge, plants can be thinned to 1 1/2" x 1 1/2", then 3" x 3", then 6" x 6" spacing or even greater. The plants removed can be transplanted or used on the table.

For home owners with limited space, lettuce can serve double duty as a border plant in ornamental

gardens. The various leaf colors available can be used to develop unique patterns in the border.

Lettuce is a useful crop in settings where shaded sites must be used for gardens because it will grow quite well under low light conditions. Lettuce also adapts well to hydroponic or "pillow" culture in greenhouse or window box production. "Container" gardening with lettuce in almost any type of container can be successful.

Gardeners should include lettuce in their selection of vegetables for fall planting. Growing conditions that combine good light and cool temperatures are conducive to the development of high quality lettuce.

Pest Problems

Several species of aphids and the cabbage looper are insect pests that frequently attack lettuce. Besides feeding damage that reduces quality, insects can spread diseases. Therefore, control of the insects and nearby weeds is important.

The fungal diseases downy mildew, white mold (*Sclerotinia*), grey mold (*Botrytis*), and powdery mildew; viral diseases lettuce mosaic and western beet yellows; and the mycoplasma-induced aster yellows are diseases that can be damaging to lettuce. Use of clean seed, sanitation - especially control of weeds in and near the lettuce planting - and control of insects are the most effective ways to combat those diseases. Good air movement through the canopy of lettuce does much to minimize problems with fungal diseases.

Harvesting

Crisp head lettuce is ready for harvest when the heads are solid and the tops become yellowish green. Butterhead varieties may be harvested when a loose head is formed.

Heads should be cut at or slightly below the soil surface. Be careful to avoid damaging the outer wrapper leaves. Trim damaged or soiled leaves at the base of the head before rinsing the heads in cool water when preparing for eating.

Leaf lettuce may be harvested any time after the plants are large enough to use. It is a good practice to thin leaf lettuce several times, removing the largest plants for use and leaving the smaller ones to develop. This extends the harvest of one planting for a considerable period of time.

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