

Growing Lettuces in Summer

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Many gardeners see lettuce as a summer vegetable but in fact it grows better in the cooler months of spring and autumn. In summer it bolts very quickly and the leaves have a tendency to take on a bitter flavour as soon as they mature. However there are a few things you can do to improve the quality of your summer lettuces.

Natural shading

In summer lettuces only need about five hours of direct sunlight each day. Lettuces grown in semi shade during the summer months will remain sweeter for longer and are slower to go to seed.

Suggested shady sites are the south side of your house or under shady trees. When growing them in your main vegetable patch plant them in the shade of larger vegetables such as corn or staked tomatoes.



Lettuces growing in the shade of mature asparagus leaves. The bird netting is to stop sparrows eating the lettuces.

Artificial shading

Another shading option is to cover your lettuces with 50% shade cloth. While it can be removed on cloudy



Lettuce under 50% shade cloth. The cloth is held up with a temporary frame made of high density polypipe.

days I usually leave the lettuce patch in my vegetable garden permanently under shade cloth during the summer months.

Grow heat tolerant lettuce varieties

Some lettuce varieties do better in hotter weather than others. Below are the pros and cons of some lettuces I have grown in summer.

Recommended to grow in summer

Little Gem: Retains its sweet flavour long after other lettuce varieties have turned bitter.

Butterhead: Retains its sweet flavour for longer, though not as long as Little Gem.

Cos: More resistant to warm weather fungal diseases such as powdery mildew.

Not recommended to grow in summer

Great Lakes: More prone to fungal diseases in warm weather.

Red and Green Oak Leaf: Turns bitter very quickly. Best grown in spring and autumn unless grown as baby lettuces.



Little Gem lettuce. This is my favourite hearting lettuce as it retains its sweetness long after all other lettuce varieties have turned bitter. It also shows good resistance to fungal diseases, which makes it an ideal lettuce to grow in summer.

Baby lettuces

Another method of growing sweet summer lettuces is to grow baby lettuces. To do this thickly sow an area with

lettuce seeds and start picking the larger baby lettuces as soon as they reach the seedling stage. The best way to grow baby lettuces is to plant a new batch in a large pot every two or three weeks, that way there will always be succulent young lettuces ready to pick.



Baby lettuces growing in a self-watering pot.

Summer salad alternatives

Even with the best efforts I can still find myself short of

high quality lettuce leaves in summer so I often make salads using other types of vegetables.

Cucumber: Makes a great summer salad base. It is the main ingredient in Greek salad, which also uses tomatoes, capsicum and salad onions, all of which are in season during the summer months. Greek salad is my go to recipe when quality lettuce leaves are in short supply.

Celtuce: Also called stem lettuce, celery lettuce or Chinese lettuce. Though related to lettuce it in fact has quite different properties. While its leaves look like Cos lettuce leaves and the taste is similar to lettuce as it goes to seed it does not turn bitter, which means it can be harvested for an extended period of time. What's more the stems can also be eaten chopped up in a salad or cooked.

Rocket: Grows well in summer and makes a great salad base alternative. But like lettuce it tends to turn bitter more quickly in the hotter weather so needs to be picked young.

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