



Grow a Salad in Your Backyard

Join lots of fellow gardeners and grow some vegetables this year. And what better way to start than by growing the ingredients for a nutritious and delicious salad? Once you've tasted a salad made from vegetables just harvested from your garden, you will never be satisfied with the produce offered at the grocery store again.

We may have to wait until the middle of May to plant some vegetables, but there are many that thrive when planted right now.

Prepare the Soil

If you are planting vegetables in the ground, make sure the soil is dry enough to be worked. Grab a handful and gently squeeze it in your hand. If the soil crumbles when you open your hand, it is ready to plant. If it stays in a tight ball, wait for a few days and try again.

Before planting, loosen the soil with a rototiller or garden fork. It is difficult for roots to push through heavy soil so make sure the top couple inches of soil is fine-textured.

Planting in Containers

Planting vegetables in containers is another option. I grow all my vegetables in terra cotta pots and Earth boxes. If you garden in containers, use a soil-less potting mix and choose a container at least 10 inches across – but bigger is better.

Easy-to-grow Vegetables

Arugula is grown for its leaves high in potassium and vitamin C. Its flavor may be too strong to be eaten by itself, but it adds delicious flavor to lettuce mixes. Plant Arugula seeds $\frac{1}{2}$ to 1 inch deep about 4 inches apart. Plant a small quantity of seeds every 7 days as long as plants have time to mature before hot weather sets in. Each planting has a short window of harvesting for the best flavor.



Leaf and romaine lettuces are the most often-grown lettuces for homegrown salads. Plant seeds $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ inch deep about 4 inches apart for leaf lettuce and 6 to 8 inches apart for romaine lettuce. Lettuce is shallow rooted so water lightly and often. Harvest leaf lettuce as soon as leaves are large enough to use. Harvest romaine lettuce when it grows into a long, medium-dense head.

Spinach leaves are high in iron, beta carotene and folic acid. It is also rich in vitamins A and C. Plant seeds $\frac{1}{2}$ inch deep and 2 to 4 inches apart. Keep spinach plants well watered. If your spinach begins producing light green leaves, it needs to be fertilized with a high nitrogen fertilizer. Young leaves taste the best so begin to harvest leaves as soon as they are large enough to use.

Carrots are rich in beta carotene. Orange carrots are the most common, but you could try other varieties in shades of white, yellow or purple. There are types that grow long and slender or others that grow small and round. Plant seeds $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ inch deep and 6 inches apart. They may take up to 2 weeks to germinate and seedlings may not appear at the same time. Depending on which variety you've decided to grow, pick them when they are at least $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ inches in diameter.

Grow **onions** from seeds, sets or plants. I usually plant sets (small bulbs less than 1 inch across) to produce salad onions within 30 days of planting. Plant sets for salad onions 1 inch deep and close enough together to touch each other. Harvest them before overcrowding is a problem. Harvest them anytime after the tops have grown 6 inches tall. Their flavor becomes stronger the longer they grow.



Radishes grow either long and cylindrical or small and round. Most varieties are red or white, but there are varieties in shades of purple, lavender and pink. Plant seeds $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ inch deep and 2 to 4 inches apart. Radishes are best harvested before they are 1 inch in diameter.

Grow these vegetables and you'll have the ingredients for mouth-watering spring salads. After Mother's Day, plant tomatoes, cucumbers and peppers, and you'll have fresh ingredients for summer salads, too.



Diana Stoll is a horticulturist and the garden center manager at The Planter's Palette, 28W571 Roosevelt Rd., Winfield, IL. Call 630-293-1040 or visit their website at www.planterspalette.com for more information.