

Horticulture Notes

Growing Lettuce in Spring or Fall

If you have a small place in your garden but can't decide what to plant, why not plant lettuce?

Lettuce is a cool-weather crop that grows best when the day temperatures are between 55 and 65 degrees F and the night temperatures are between 50 and 55 degrees F. Depending on the cultivar, temperatures, and day length, most lettuce cultivars are ready to pick in 5 to 7 weeks. Although fall is the best time to plant lettuce, it can also be planted in the early spring. New lettuce cultivars are being developed that are more tolerant to high heat, providing you with wider windows for planting and enjoying lettuce.

Lettuce cultivars fall into four main categories or types: crisphead, loose leaf, romaine (or cos), and butterhead (semiheading).

Crisphead lettuce is the commonly known iceberg type. Crisphead types require 70 to 85 days to mature and can be grown in square-foot, raised-bed, and container gardens as well as traditional gardens. One caution—grow this one in a fall garden. Crisphead lettuce is not the type of lettuce best suited for production in Alabama.

Leaf and butterhead lettuces are great choices for gardens in Alabama. They mature in 40 to 50 days, have good heat tolerance, and are a good choice for a

spring or fall garden. In addition to the standard green leaf types, hundreds of cultivars with various leaf colors are available for you to try. For example, the cultivar Red Sails is an All-America Selection winner with red leaves. 'Sierra' lettuce leaves are green with a red blush.

Romaine (or cos) lettuce is popular in markets and has become one of the favorite lettuces for salads. This tall, upright lettuce can grow 8 to 20 inches tall. 'Paris Island Cos' is a good variety to plant. It is fast maturing and tolerant of conditions that induce bolting.

Lettuce needs a soil pH of 6.5 to 6.8. It is sensitive to low pH. Be sure to plant in a well-drained soil that is capable of holding moisture. You may need to add organic matter to the soil. If you mulch too heavily, you may harbor snails that will feed on the lettuce, so mulch sparingly.

Most lettuces are established by direct seeding or transplanting. If you direct seed, be sure to sow seed no more than ¼ inch deep. If there is danger of a late frost after planting, cover with a row cover. Intersperse lettuce with ornamental plantings. The colors and textures will accent your garden.

Lettuce Types	Cultivars	Specific Characteristics
Leaf and butterhead lettuce	New Red Fire Red Prize Red Sails Red Salad Salad Bowl Sierra Slobolt Tango Butterscotch Ermosa Esmeralda Harmony Optima	Red Leaf Red Leaf Red Leaf Red Leaf Green Leaf Green Leaf with red blushes Green Leaf and bolting tolerant Green Leaf Butterhead Butterhead Butterhead Butterhead Butterhead
Romaine (or cos)	Green Towers Parris Island	Tolerant of conditions that induce bolting Tolerant of conditions that induce bolting
Head Lettuce (crisphead)	Ithaca Great Lakes Supreme	



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