

## PESTS & DISEASES

Check plants when watering or weeding and respond as soon as problems are spotted.

- **Slugs and snails** - destroy seedlings and fresh new growth year round. In small areas, try hand removal after dark. Beer traps - a jam jar sunk in the ground and filled with beer - will attract slugs, which then drown.
- **Cutworms** - soil dwelling caterpillars that feed on the roots and stem bases of many crops, causing sudden wilt and death. Weed the area well to starve caterpillars before sowing. Parasitic nematodes effectively destroy cutworms.
- **Aphids** (greenfly/blackfly) - infest most crops and suck sap, weakening the plant and spreading virus diseases. They can be controlled with an organic

insecticide such as derris, fatty acids or vegetable oils.

- **Virus** - causes leaf discoloration and mottling with distorted or stunted growth. Carried by aphids and eelworms, so control to reduce outbreaks. Infected plants should be removed and burnt.
- **Downy mildew** - a fluffy mildew growth affecting lettuces, onions and spinach. Sow crops thinly and remove any affected leaves once seedlings have germinated.
- **Leaf spot** - older leaves on brassicas, spinach and beetroot show round brown spots and the affected tissue may fall away to leave bare holes. The disease worsens when crops are overcrowded, so thin out and do not replant the same crop in the same place the following year.

## SALADS THROUGH THE SEASONS

**SPRING:** Sow early radish outdoors from March (January indoors); plant shallot and garlic bulbs out from February (harvest from July); sow seeds of lettuce and rocket outdoors over several weeks from early spring until mid summer; sow tomato seeds indoors from early spring and plant up in pots after 8 weeks. Sow spring (or salad) onion seed outdoors at three-week intervals from early April to early June.

**SUMMER:** Sow seed of Florence fennel from April to July and slice the bulb-like swollen leaf bases and leaves in salads to give an aniseed flavour. Plant out celery seedlings in May or June (harvest stalks in October) and seed-grown or bought tomato plants. Use winter beetroot for intercropping; plants can be sown and harvested virtually all year.

**AUTUMN:** Sow spring lettuce outdoors in August/September (crop in May).



## WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- Vegetable seeds
  - Seed trays
  - Assorted containers
  - Potting compost
  - Growbags
  - Watering can with rose
  - Compound fertiliser
  - Organic matter
  - Mulch
- For more information:  
[www.rhs.org.uk/advice](http://www.rhs.org.uk/advice)  
[www.plantforlife.info](http://www.plantforlife.info)

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## THE EASY GUIDE TO

# SALAD CROPS



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## SALAD CROPS

Growing salad crops may not seem possible if you are restricted to a small planting area, but if you'd like to use your growing space for plants with colour, interest and mouth-watering flavours, salad crops could be the perfect choice for you.

Nothing tastes as good, or is as fresh or rewarding as food you have grown yourself, so why not encourage the whole family to get involved. Children will enjoy helping out too - whether sowing seed, potting on, watering or picking the crop, not to mention eating the healthy harvest!

## SMALL-SCALE IDEAS

**CONTAINERS:** Salad crops flourish in the smallest space, so start by collecting a variety of novel containers. Why not try reusing plastic food packaging such as mushroom and tomato trays for sowing seeds (be sure to add drainage holes), yogurt pots are ideal for potting on small seedlings, or sow directly into tin cans of various sizes. Disused compost bins or stacked tyres are useful for planting deep-rooting squash, cucumbers and aubergines.

**GROW BAGS:** For instant convenience, sow directly into a grow bag, but make sure water is reaching the roots. Traditionally used for raising tomatoes, they also suit many other crops and can be replanted when the tomatoes are over.

**HANGING BASKETS:** are a quirky and attractive way of planting salad crops. Use shallow-rooting cut-and-come-again crops such as red lettuce mixed with brightly coloured trailers such as nasturtiums.

**WINDOW BOXES:** can be planted with a mixture of sweetly scented flowering herbs such as lavender and salad leaves; you could even pick your harvest from indoors!

**UP THE WALL:** If you have little space on the ground, a sheltered wall can be used for vertical growing. Attach a secure mesh framework and train up tomatoes, beans and cucumbers. Tie pots of different shapes and sizes to the framework with wire to create a productive mini kitchen garden.



## LOOKING AFTER YOUR SALAD CROPS

Grow salad crops where they are easy to look after and harvest; perhaps in an accessible window box, near the kitchen or in a raised bed, where they can also provide ornamental value. Check your crop daily if possible, particularly in summer when growth is rapid; keeping on top of the little jobs prevents them from becoming bigger tasks later on.

**WATER:** This vital ingredient is essential for a healthy crop, especially during the germination period when lack of water may cause crop failure. Use a watering can with a rose to prevent seeds from washing away. Remove this when plants grow bigger and water direct to soil around the roots.

Water in the morning or evening to avoid the midday heat, when watering can intensify leaf scorch. Water slowly so that moisture has a chance to soak well into the soil. In hot weather, compost will dry out rapidly; even more so in pots, so check more frequently.

**FEEDING:** Salad crops need nitrogen for leaf growth, phosphorous for root development and potash to build resistance to pest and diseases. Adding well-rotted organic matter such as leaf mulch and compost increases nutrient levels present in the soil. Most compound fertilisers contain a mixture of all three and the exact nutrient content is listed on the packet.

**REDUCE COMPETITION:** Weed seeds can be a useful indicator of the warmth of soil for sowing, but are generally a nuisance. They will compete with, and starve young crops of resources, light, moisture and nutrients, and often act as hosts for pests. Remove by hand, ensuring root fragments are not left behind. Mulches help to suppress weed growth, and conserve moisture and nutrients. If using



chemical control, check how long the ground must be left before edible crops can be planted.

Thin newly germinated seedlings, leaving the healthiest and strongest plants to grow. This keeps competition down and gives plants enough space to develop well.

**HARVESTING:** Some crops can't be stored, so sow more seeds every few weeks or mix early and late varieties. Crops will then be ready for picking at different times, reducing glut and famine periods.

Many baby salad leaves such as rocket, coriander and mizuna will produce a second yield later in the year after cutting. Cut individual lettuce leaves as needed, leaving the heart to continue growing.



## INTERPLANTING WITH FLOWERS

Salad crops are easily integrated into a bedding scheme, raised bed or flower border. In fact, intermixing crops lessens the threat of large-scale pest and disease infestations, reduces competition and increases variety and interest in a small space. Check requirements of each crop and try to group together plants that happily co-exist, for example compact, quick-growing radishes or lettuces with slow-to-mature parsley.

**COMPANION PLANTING:** Certain crops may benefit from being planted together; tomatoes with *Calendula officinalis* (French marigolds) is a common example. The scent of the marigolds is said to repel greenfly from the tomatoes. Interplanting chrysanthemums or sunflowers with strongly-scented chives helps keep aphids away from the flowers. Planting *Achillea millefolium* is thought to boost the vigour of surrounding plants by accumulating nutrients and making these more readily available in the soil.

**INFORMAL EFFECT:** Edible crops don't need to be sown in straight lines. In traditional potager and monastic gardens fruit, vegetables, flowers and herbs were all grown together in an informal mix. Try experimenting with spiral,

square and circle shapes, and different combinations of colour, texture and foliage? Use lavender, rosemary, lettuce or clipped bay to create attractive edging. Combine richly coloured leaf crops such as Swiss chard 'Bright Lights' and lettuce 'Red Sails' with flowers such as pot marigold, sunflowers or nasturtium.

**EDIBLE FLOWERS:** Many flowers can be used in planting schemes that are themselves edible:

- Leaves and flowers of nasturtium can both be used in salads
- Ornamental onions (*Allium*) can be used like onions - all parts of the plant are edible
- *Cynara cardunculus* (cardoon) can reach 2.5m tall; blanch the stems and eat like celery
- Use rosemary and lavender leaves and flowers in salads
- Flowers of *Hemerocallis* (day lilies) make an attractive garnish.

