Growing Lettuce

Adapted From ID-128 Home Vegetable Gardening in Kentucky

Lettuce is an important cool-season vegetable crop for salads and one of the easiest to grow. It tolerates light frost, but intense sunlight and high summer temperatures cause seedstalk formation and bitter flavors, especially in bibb types. Slow-bolting or heat-resistant varieties are available.

There are four types of lettuce: crisphead, the most common fresh market type; butterhead or bibb, most commonly grown in forcing structures; romaine or cos, a very nutritious lettuce that forms an upright head; and leaf, the most common home garden lettuce. The color of the leaf varieties differ from shades of green to red.

Fertilizers
Lettuce does not need additional fertilizers, especially nitrogen.

Planting
Seeds of leaf varieties are generally sown in rows, 20 to 30 seeds/foot, with rows 8 to 12 inches apart. For square-foot garden, plant four plants per square. For early and late planting, cos and head types should be started as transplants and spaced 12 to 18 inches apart in rows 20 inches apart. Plant lettuce on the shady side of tall-growing crops such as sweet corn, staked tomatoes and pole beans, or in other cool areas of the garden. Interplanting (planting between rows or plants of later-maturing crops like tomatoes, broccoli and Brussels sprouts) can be practiced, especially in the fall garden. Border planting along the edges of the garden or flower bed is excellent. Make succession plantings so that lettuce will be available from May through November. Lettuce, especially leaf and bibb, does well in hotbeds during the winter months and in cold frames in the spring and late fall.

Cultivation
Keep lettuce weed free. They can benefit from a light layer of mulch.

Harvesting
You can pick leaf lettuce as soon as the plants reach a suitable size. The older, outer leaves contain high levels of calcium and can be used first. Also, you may wish to harvest every other plant or the very largest plants first, to thin the row. Bibb lettuce is mature when leaves begin to cup inward to form a loose head. Cos or romaine is ready to use when leaves have elongated and overlapped to form a fairly tight head about 4 inches wide at the base and 6 to 8 inches tall. Crisphead is mature when leaves overlap to form a head similar to that available in the stores.

Storage
Crisphead lettuce will store about two weeks in the crisper drawer of the refrigerator before russetting begins. Leaf and bibb will store as long as four weeks if the leaves are dry when bagged. If lettuce is to be stored, harvest when dry. Do not wash; place in a plastic bag, and store in the crisper drawer. Wash before use.

Diseases
Damping-off—Use fungicide-treated seed and plant into well-drained soils.
Bottom rot—Cultural practices and crop rotation are important tools to manage this disease. Do not plant lettuce after beans, and turn under grass and other crops early to ensure thorough rotting before planting. Avoid wet, poorly drained sites.

Insects
 Aphids are black, red or green, soft-bodied insects grouped in colonies on leaves and stems. Most individuals in a colony are wingless. By sucking the sap, they cause leaves to wilt, curl, pucker, stunt or yellow. Aphids produce “honeydew” which falls on leaves, making them sticky. Sooty mold may develop on honeydew deposits. Some aphids transmit viruses. Some whitish or bluish aphids also feed on beet roots but do not seem to be a serious problem. Refer to the footnote below for treatment options.

Cutworms are dull-colored, smooth caterpillars that cut off plants above, at or below ground level. Some climb plants and feed on leaves, buds or fruit. Underground types are particularly destructive to young pepper, tomato, cabbage, pea, bean and squash plants. Use a 6-inch diameter cardboard collar 3 inches high, pushed into the soil 1 inch after planting transplants. Prepare beds and eliminate weeds at least two weeks before planting. Bait formulations, sometimes using bran or applying rolled oats with molasses containing Bacillus thuringiensis var. kurstaki, have been known to effectively control cutworm species when applied to the soil.
Grasshoppers—There are a number of species of grasshoppers, and when they are a problem Sevin can be used for control.

Imported Cabbageworm—The imported cabbageworm is a velvety green caterpillar up to 1 1/4 inch long. The adult is a white butterfly with black markings on the wings. The caterpillar eats ragged holes in cabbage or lettuce leaves and bores into the head. Larvae are commonly found near the developing bud of the plant. Sprays containing Bacillus thuringiensis are effective.

Leafhoppers are tiny, pale green, wedge-shaped, active insects that are mostly pests of potatoes, beans and lettuce. Immature leafhoppers resemble the adults and move sideways when disturbed. By sucking the sap, they cause bean leaves to curl downward and turn yellow. Plants may be stunted or killed. On potatoes, the tips and sides of leaves curl upward, turn yellow to brown and get brittle. Aster yellows virus is spread to lettuce by leafhoppers. Plant lettuce near hedges or other sheltered areas. Control weeds that may host leafhoppers and harbor viruses, or treat weeds along with the crops for leafhoppers. Botanical insecticides based on Pyrethrum and Neem have shown fair control of this pest.

Sowbugs are insect relatives that roll into a ball when disturbed. They feed mostly on decaying organic matter, but also damage root hairs, or decaying lettuce leaves resting on the ground. Heavily mulched gardens and areas near compost heaps usually have more problems with this pest. Clean up ground litter under which sowbugs hide during the day. Don’t compost next to the garden.

Insect Treatments
Aphids ....................................................... 1, 4, 10, 11
Cutworms ..................................................... 9
Grasshoppers ............................................. 1, 2, 9
Imported Cabbageworms .................. 1
Leafhoppers .............................................. 1, 2, 4, 11
Sowbugs .................................................. 9


Recommended Vegetable Cultivars

LETTUCE—Butterhead Type
Sangria (red) 49 TB, B
Buttercrunch 75 TB, B

LETTUCE—Romaine Type
Green Forest 56
Parris Island Cos 76 TB

LETTUCE—Crisp Head Type
Summertime 70 H

Disease Resistance or Tolerance
B = resists premature bolting, BR = black rot, F = Fusarium wilt, H = heat tolerant, PM = powdery mildew, PR = Pink Root, TB = tip burn, TMV = tobacco mosaic virus, V = Verticillium wilt.