



## Grow Your Own Salad Mixes

Baby salad greens, sold at premium prices at supermarkets, are among the easiest of all edibles to grow in the home garden. And, harvested fresh from the garden, they hold their quality in the refrigerator much longer than purchased greens.



## Outside Your Doorstep

Imagine having a garden of mixed greens just a few steps from the kitchen. For weeks on end, you would have the means to throw together beautiful and healthful salads—effortlessly. There's no question that homegrown greens are far superior to anything that is harvested, processed, and shipped from afar. Readily available packaged seeds for "mesclun greens" (the French term for salad mixes) make growing this type of salad garden a simple matter. Some seed companies call their mixes gourmet salad blends, or mixed greens. Buying packs of pre-mixed seeds is one way to start a salad garden. There are other options as well.

### Lettuce Tale

Once upon a time, everyone bought iceberg lettuce. Summer and winter, this mild and crunchy green was the main ingredient in salads. After a time, leaf lettuces, and tall heads of dark green romaine began challenging iceberg for space on supermarket shelves. It wasn't until the late 1990s that packaged greens—triple-washed and salad-ready—appeared, as if by magic. Suddenly, sales of bagged spring mixes, baby spinach, arugula, and the rest grew exponentially. Convenience had created a new market. Gardeners everywhere smiled and thought, "We can grow our own." And so they did.



## What to Plant

Packaged mixes are available for every taste preference: mild, colorful all-lettuce blends; tangy mixes of mustards and chicories; classic combinations of herbs and salad greens. You can also choose warm or cool weather mixes, based on growing conditions. Some gardeners prefer to grow their favorite ingredients in separate patches (or pots), and mix them in the salad bowl. Popular salad mix ingredients include:

- Lettuces: Choose leaf rather than heading varieties.
- Arugula: Tender baby leaves can be harvested in as little as three weeks.
- Mustard greens (including Mizuna): Leaves are fast growing, heat-tolerant, and tasty. Some are frilly.
- Kale: Baby kale leaves are sweet and tasty.
- Swiss Chard: Leaves take several weeks to reach harvestable size (longer than lettuce and arugula) but can be cut repeatedly throughout the hot summer months.
- Curly Cress: Peppery, textured leaves grow quickly.
- Herbs: Cilantro and Chervil are two options.



Fast-growing mizuna adds texture to salads

## How to Grow



Floating row cover (folded above the prepared bed) will protect the tender seedlings from harm.



1. Start with a well-prepared seedbed or use a half-barrel or a 15 to 18 inch planter filled with good potting soil. The soil should be moist but not soggy. Add compost to help maintain consistent soil moisture—which will lead to better results.
2. Sprinkle your seed mix over the soil surface. Your aim is to have the seeds fall about  $\frac{1}{2}$  to 1 inch apart. If you are using a container, cover the entire surface with seed. In a garden bed, sprinkle the seed in wide rows of about 8 inches. If you prefer to grow ingredients separately, plant a short row of each selected seed type.
3. Cover the seedbed with no more than  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch of soil, and water with a gentle sprinkle. The water should fall like a soft rain.
4. If you (like most gardeners) fear that rabbits, cats, birds, or other animals might disturb your seedbed, cover it with a lightweight floating row cover. The cover deters most pests, and can remain in place until harvest time.
5. Keep the bed evenly moist by sprinkling every day or two, as needed.

### **Harvest, and Harvest Again**

In about four weeks, or in some cases sooner, greens will be about 4 to 5 inches tall. It's time to make your first cutting. Hold a cluster of plant tops in one hand, while cutting the leaves about  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch above the soil with a sharp knife or scissors. Be sure to leave the growing tips intact. The plants will begin to grow new leaves almost immediately, and reach cutting height again in two weeks or less. You can expect to get up to four cuttings from a single planting.

### **Repeat, and Repeat Again**

Plant a new bed every two weeks, and you will have fresh baby greens for as long as the weather remains relatively cool. When the soil becomes too warm, germination will be spotty. This is your cue to take a break until days become a little cooler. Start the routine again in late summer for a few more weeks of wonderful salads. In mild-weather regions, mixed greens can be grown through the winter!