

Week 8.

Leaf Salad Crops.

If we were looking at salad leaf ten years ago the only leaf salad crops we'd really think of would have probably been lettuce. Today there are many more different tasty varieties of leaf salad crop available. A table which lists some of the varieties you can grow is only the final page of this text.

Using the table you might like to answer the following questions:

1. Why do we need to know if the crop is a brassica?
2. Which of the salad leaf crops can be grown over winter?
3. What's the significance of the advice on transplanting, growing in modules and growing in situ?

1. Brassica salad crops

The leaves of all the common brassica plants can be eaten raw in salads. In West Wales it really is worth looking at *Kale* in the seed catalogues and selecting a few varieties. Not only will they improve your salads in winter but many are very resistant to pests. (Red varieties seem to discourage slugs.)

Some of the brassica salad crops, such as *Mizuna*, can be grown through out the year and look attractive as well as adding taste to the salad.

All the brassica salad crops need fertile well drained soil. The pH needs to be neutral or slightly alkaline as a defence against *club root*. In our rotation, lime should have been added to the legume plot a year ago to achieve this protection. (Answer to question 1) Ideally you should have added compost to their growing site some months ago. You could have maintained the soil fertility with green manures.

2. Hardy salad leaf crops

Many of the crops mentioned in the table will withstand the cold of winter. *Kale*, *Mizuna* and *Corn Salad* for example, can be sown from July to September and provide crops when they are most expensive in the shops. A bit of protection from a cloche, cold frame or greenhouse can improve the crops.

3. Growing in seed trays, modules etc. and transplanting

Most salad leaf seedlings will be ruined by slugs. It really is best to start them all off in a protected environment. Look carefully at the table. Some of this group of crops have very shallow rooting systems and don't transplant (lifting the seedling out of the soil) well. These are best started off in modules so the plant can be moved without disturbing the roots.

Remember that most salad leaf crops don't germinate well in the high temperatures of a summer greenhouse. Start them off in a place that is sheltered from extremes of temperature and away from slugs.

Sweet Corn

It's a tender crop with a long growing season. Start it off in April indoors in modules or small pots. One seed in a pot is best. Keep it moist and warm. Harden it off after the last frost and plant it carefully in a compact block area outside to aid pollination.

Remember this plant is wind pollinated. The male flowers are high up on the plant; the females are lower down between the stem and a leaf.

Sweet corn is greedy. Plant it on a mound of compost, at least 20 cm between each plant.

Learning when to harvest the cobs takes a bit of practice. Wait until the tassel has begun to wither and turn brown. Pick and take the cobs straight to the kitchen.

Three Sister Plot

The sweetcorn stems will provide the support for the climbing French bean vines. The leguminous roots of the French beans will add a bit of fertility to the soil, whilst the pumpkin plants will spread at ground level and provide a living mulch to keep the soil damp.

Weeds

1. What are weeds and why are they a problem?
2. How do weeds get in your plot?
3. What are the four main organic methods of controlling weeds?

Why are weeds a problem?

What are “weeds”? A weed is just a plant you hadn’t planned to grow in a particular space. If you grow food crops in organic soil you’ll certainly get weeds growing too.

Weeds can be troublesome. They compete for light, moisture and nutrients with the food crops. They can suffocate young plants. However, as with most things, weeds are a mixed blessing. Although they can provide a habitat for creatures gardeners regard as pests (e.g. slugs and snails), many weeds can also provide a safe haven for the predators of the same pests (e.g. beetles and frogs).

Soil Health Indicator

Some growers believe that weed growth is a good indicator of the health of the soil. They argue that if weeds progress through their life cycle quickly, producing spindly flowers and seeds, it’s a sign that the plant is under stress and that one of the plant’s essential requirements is missing. By inference, organic soil ought to produce leafy, well developed weeds luxuriating in the conditions provided.

How do weeds get in your plot?

If weeds appear in your plot they could have come from a variety of sources.

Some weeds will develop from fragments of roots that were left in the soil when the plot was dug. Plants such as dandelion and couch grass will develop from the tiniest remnant of root left in the soil. Other weeds will develop from seeds lying dormant in the soil whilst some will have arrived by the process of seed dispersal from a neighbouring parent plant.

The organic methods of controlling weeds.

There are four main organic ways to control weeds. I think three methods are acceptable.

1. Hand weeding and hoeing.

“A little and often” is the common sense mantra that accompanies this method. Crops that need this method are the onion family, carrots throughout their development and the early stages of legumes, salads and brassicas. Hot compost the remains of weeds or leave them to wilt on the soil surface.

2. Suppression by competitive growth.

Potatoes, mature parsnips and brassicas, cucumbers, celery, peas, beans and green manure can all suffocate most weeds. If any flowering heads of weed plants poke up among the crop, whisk them out before they set seed and add them to a hot compost heap.

3. Mulching.

When the ground is wet, cover it with manure, compost, straw, leaves, grass clippings, paper, cardboard, old carpet, polythene or plastic sheeting.

5-10 cm mulch of organic matter will suffocate most weeds. Those that survive can easily be hand weeded.

Apart from killing weeds many types of mulch will retain moisture and improve fertility and structure. You can use mulched areas as organic pathways when tending your other crops.

The downside is that some mulch looks unattractive and others, such as plastic, are not particularly environmentally friendly. Mulches can harbour both pests and their predators.

4. Flame guns

The first pass dries the weeds. The second pass burns them off. Both passes cremate beetles, frogs, et al!

Attracting and feeding wildlife

Rule 1: Think native

Where ever possible try to use native plants and food to encourage wildlife. In general they support more species than imported material. For example, both native species of oak tree each support more than 350 species of wildlife. While it may not be appropriate to allow an oak to mature in an urban garden it can be coppiced, pollarded or contained as a hedgerow plant.

Rule 2: Think variety

We are all limited by our imagination and budget. Sometimes there is a temptation to plant the same kinds of plant and create a single habitat. For example, we might plant monoculture hawthorn hedge or a flower bed full of roses or a vegetable plot full of potatoes. Natural habitats are far less likely to be monocultures. They support a web of inter related species.

So, if you're planting for wildlife then select an appropriate variety of native plants. (There is a good source of information on local plants on the web. www.nhm.ac.uk/science/projects/fff/SearchPC.htm)

Think variety in your maintenance as well as in your planting. Cutting the whole lawn at the same height, or, cutting all the hedges in the same way every year, limits the variety of resources available to wildlife. Different parts of the lawn can be managed in different ways and some hedges can be trimmed on a three or four year cycle.

Attracting Birds

Planting

Some of the native plants that can provide food for birds in your garden include:

Barberry, cotoneasters, crab apples, blackthorn, hawthorn, holly, honeysuckle, ivy, rowan, birch, cornflower, evening primrose, forget me not, honesty, sunflower and teasel.

Bird Tables

The RSPB advice on bird tables : They are “ideal for feeding most species and suitable for all foods. Make a simple tray mounted on a post, or on brackets to a window sill, or suspended from a branch. It needs a raised rim to retain food and a few holes to allow rainwater to drain away. A gap at the corner of the rim will allow you to clean away uneaten food. A basic roof can keep off the heaviest rain, but is not essential and can deter the more wary species. Site the table with care to avoid predation by cats.”

Bird Food

The other methods widely used to offer food to birds are wire or plastic mesh baskets, seed hoppers and homemade devices.

Different seed mixes are sold to attract different groups of birds. E.g. Millet is mainly used to attract small birds such as house sparrows and finches. Tits and greenfinches are attracted to peanuts and sunflower seed. (Peanuts need to be purchased from a reputable supplier. They can contain a natural toxin ‘aflatoxin.’) There are many household food items that are suitable for birds. These include: cooked and uncooked pastry; cooked rice, dry porridge oats, fat and suet, chopped bacon rind, potatoes (baked, roast or mashed.), bruised and rotten fruit and dried fruits.

Bird pudding

Some of the above foods can be mixed into hot melted fat. Use a mixture of one third fat and two thirds food. Pour the pudding into a container to cool and suspend it or place on the bird table when cool.

Water

Birds need a source of water for drinking and washing. If you haven't got a pond you can provide purpose made baths or just sink the lid of a dustbin in the ground. Put a few stones in the bath as perches and frequently change the water.

When to feed birds

The RSPB advice : “The value of winter feeding has been known for a long time, but in recent years it has become apparent that many birds are struggling to survive during the breeding season because of fluctuations in the weather, intensive farming and greater tidiness in gardens and all built up areas. By feeding year round, we are giving birds a better chance to survive the periods of food shortage whenever they occur.”

In spring and summer, hygiene becomes particularly important.

“Avoid using peanuts, fat and bread at this time, since these foods can be harmful if brought to young nestlings. If you feel you must put out peanuts, only do so in suitable mesh feeders that do not allow whole or half peanuts to be removed.”

Leaf Salad Crops

A table of basic information.

Variety	Brassica ?	Hardy?	Requirements	Other information
Lettuce	No	Not very	Moist fertile soil. Prefers cool germination. Will not germinate above 20c	Many varieties
Chicory and Endive	No	Yes, more than lettuce.	Unfussy plants. Sow in cool conditions, in modules and transplant. Avoid very humid conditions.	Hot weather is meant to cause bitterness.
Kale	Yes	Yes	Rugged plants that will survive when others fail. Fertile well drained soil is best. Sow in trays and transplant.	Use younger more tender leaves
Chinese Cabbage and Komatsuna	Yes	<u>Some</u> are very hardy.	Need lots of water. They do not transplant well, so grow in modules.	Mild flavour.
Mustard cabbage: Mizuna and Mibuna	Yes	Mizuna yes. Mibuna is less hardy.	Mizuna is a forgiving attractive plant that you can "cut and come again" at most stages of development. Mibuna is less productive but adds a pretty dimension to salads. Modules or direct sowing.	Mild mustard flavour.
Mustard cabbage. "Green in snow" and red and purple leaved mustards	Yes	Yes	Not as vigorous as Mizuna. "Cut and come again" but sparingly. Modules or direct sowing.	Hot flavour.
Leaf Beet including Swiss Chard	No	Yes	Fertile, moist soil required. Red varieties are more slug resistant... you might be able to sow directly into the soil. Otherwise use modules	Use small leaves and thinnings in salad
Alfalfa	No	Yes	Used as a green manure. Legume which does not like wet soils.	Eat young leaves.
Winter Purslane, "Miner's Lettuce."	No	Yes with protection.	Sow in situ or in modules. Adaptable but likes well drained soil. "Cut and come again."	Eat leaves and succulent stems.
Summer Purslane	No	No	Needs warmth and well drained soil. Sow in situ or in modules. Keep well watered.	Pick single leaves. The seed heads are unpleasant to eat.
Corn Salad "Lambs Lettuce."	No	Yes	Robust, forgiving plant but doesn't like hot dry conditions. Can be transplanted.	Eat single leaves and use quickly. Mild taste.
Land Cress	No	Yes	Needs moist humus rich soil. Grows well between taller plants	Pick single leaves. Strong flavour
Rocket	No	Fairly	Most varieties grow very quickly. Grow in situ or in modules.	Leaves and flowers are edible.