

GROW YOUR OWN

If you have never grown your own vegetables before, you're in for a treat! Home-grown veg provide a taste experience that commercially grown ones rarely do, and at a fraction of the price. And what could be more wonderful than picking your own supper, grown by your own hand?

SALAD DAYS

Say goodbye to bags of soggy salad leaves that you've had to throw away only a day or two after buying them. Instead, grow your own! They'll be fresher and more nutritious, taste infinitely better and be infinitely cheaper, and they'll go on giving you leaves for much longer. You can sow the seeds any time from spring to summer or, if you cover the plants to protect them, you can even sow in autumn for a winter crop. Apart from traditional lettuces, such as Butterhead, Cos and Iceberg, there are cut-and-come-again varieties, like Bijou, with its dark red leaves, as well as loose- and oak-leaf types, not to mention radicchio, endive and rocket.

SALAD FROM SCRATCH

- 1 Choose your seeds: you can buy seeds of a single type, or ready-mixed packets which will produce a variety of leaves for a mixed salad from one sowing.
- 2 Choose a site in sun or part-shade. Dig the soil, removing any stones, then incorporate some garden compost or

well-rotted manure to provide plenty of nourishment and help retain moisture. Rake the soil over to produce a fine tilth (fine grains of soil).

- 3 Draw a cane or other implement across the soil to make shallow grooves in it about 30 cm (12 in) apart, 1.5 cm (½ in) deep and no more than 60 cm (2 ft) long. Tip some seeds into your hand, take a pinch and sprinkle them thinly along the groove. Cover with soil, label and water.
- 4 When the seedlings are about 2 cm (1 in) tall, thin them out to 15–30 cm (6–12 in) apart to give them space to spread, depending on their variety. Make sure you keep the soil just moist, especially near harvesting. Dry soil will cause the plants to ‘bolt’ – produce flowers at the expense of leaves.
- 5 Pick leaves from cut-and-come-again varieties when the plants are about 5 cm (2 in) tall, or wait till they are 15 cm (6 in) tall and cut off the whole head, leaving a 2-cm (1-in) stump from which a new plant will sprout. Pick leaves from loose-leaf lettuces regularly to encourage continued growth. Harvest other lettuces by cutting them off at the base or pulling up the whole plant.



TOP TIP

To prevent yourself being inundated with salad crops, don't sow all the seeds at once. Sow short rows every two weeks for a continuous supply.



TOP TIP

Slugs are particularly partial to lettuce. However, it seems they are less fond of the varieties with red in their leaves, so these will be more trouble-free.

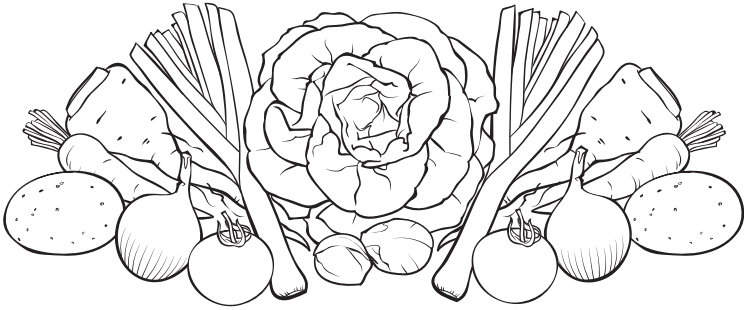
COSTWISE

Seeds are the cheapest option but if you want your salad leaves in a hurry, buy seedlings instead. Do bear in mind, though, that the varieties on offer will be more limited than with seeds.

IN THE FLOWER GARDEN

Have you ever noticed how pretty some vegetables are? If you haven't got space for a separate vegetable plot, why not fit some in the flower beds?

- * As long as they have enough light, lettuces are great at filling in the space between other plants. With their frilly leaves, some even look like flowers. Try red or green Salad Bowl, lusciously red Lollo Rosso, or Firebird, a bright red radicchio variety.
- * Sweetcorn looks like an exotic ornamental grass. Plant in blocks rather than rows, as sweetcorn is wind-pollinated which means that the pollen must be blown from one plant to another, rather than carried by bees.



- * With its decorative, thick red or yellow stems, Swiss chard is much too good-looking to confine to the vegetable plot – grow it as an edible ornamental among your flowers.
- * With their flower-like heads, members of the cabbage family also mix and match well with non-edible flowering plants. Try curly kale or Savoy cabbage.

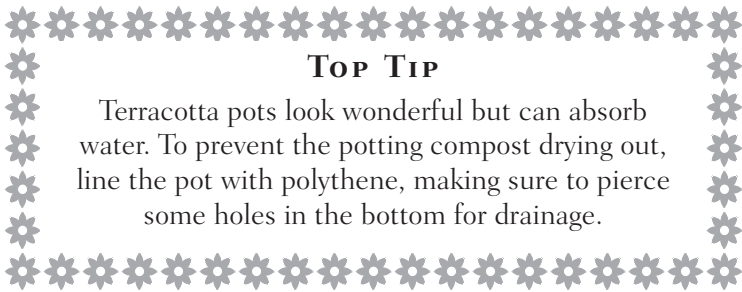
CONTAINER CROPS

No garden? No worries! Grow your vegetables in containers instead – even a balcony can support a few of these, and a window box can become a mini-vegetable plot. Choose pots that will be large enough for the eventual size of your plants – 20–47 cm (8–17 in) wide is ideal. Root vegetables will need deep pots, while top-heavy plants like tomatoes need big ones to balance their weight. And if you can't afford to buy pots, have a look at pages 43–5 for some brilliant ideas for free – or nearly free – containers. Fill them with soil-based potting compost because this retains moisture better and, if possible, mix in some water-retaining crystals, as compost in pots is more

susceptible to drying out than soil in the open ground. You'll need to water more often than if you were growing crops in beds. For the plump, fattest fruits, feed fruiting crops with a high-potash feed once the flowers form.

Try compact plants like:

- * sweet peppers, chilli peppers and aubergines (in a warm spot and supported with canes)
- * courgettes
- * tumbling varieties of tomatoes (good for window boxes or hanging baskets)
- * beetroot, carrots and potatoes (in deep containers)
- * loose-leaf lettuces (because you pick only a few leaves at a time rather than taking the whole head, so the plants still look decorative)



TOP TIP

Terracotta pots look wonderful but can absorb water. To prevent the potting compost drying out, line the pot with polythene, making sure to pierce some holes in the bottom for drainage.

BAGS OF GOODNESS

No digging, no soil preparation – what more could you ask? Growing bags are the ultimate in instant gardening, and a single

bag – measuring just 35×95 cm (13×37 in) – can support three vegetable plants or a row of salad crops. When you get your bag home:

- 1 Pierce drainage holes in the bottom, then shake and knead the bag to loosen the compost, and shape it into a low mound.
- 2 If you are growing individual plants, cut out the marked squares on the top. If you are growing a row, cut a single rectangle along the length.
- 3 Plant or sow your vegetables (at the correct time of year, of course). Like other containers, growing bags are suitable for shallow-rooting crops such as tomatoes, cucumbers, courgettes, peppers, aubergines, broad beans, or salad vegetables such as endive, lettuce, basil and rocket. Water in well, and label.
- 4 Tie taller plants with canes when they are 20 cm (8 in) high, pushing the canes in next to each plant and attaching them to a frame.
- 5 Keep the plants well watered, feed and, when ready, harvest and enjoy!



TOP TIP

When your growing bag has done its job, recycle it.
Turn the compost out onto the soil in your garden
and use as a soil conditioner.