

Lettuces – the different types and when to sow

There's always a corner in the garden for one or two lettuces.

Lettuce, *Lactuca sativa*, comes in countless forms. Colours range from green to red and can have yellow, gold or blue-teal leaves. The 18<sup>th</sup> Century Scottish gardener, James Justice<sup>1</sup>, even refers to a variety, 'Aleppo', which was 'valued for its fine spotted leaves.' [like the modern variety 'Freckles'.] Some varieties, Cos or Romaine types, have wonderful, crisp leaves; crispheads and butterheads heart up well; while cut and come again varieties add a touch of freshness to any sandwich.

Unsurprisingly, red-leafed varieties have now become very popular. Anti-oxidant anthocyanins make vegetable leaves red, so there are good health-giving reasons for growing and eating red veg – as well as the fact that they look attractive when planted beside green ones.

These anthocyanins also affect how a plant photosynthesises: among other things, red lettuces need less water. So, during a hot, dry spell, they should fare better than their green counterparts. And, they may be a weapon in our battle with slugs. As we know, our garden's top pest hates the wonderful dry weather we all adore, but it's been suggested that it finds red leaved vegetables less palatable.

As you can imagine, I'm no lover of slugs, so I'm going to see if there's any truth in the theory that molluscs find the slightly more bitter red leaf a tad less appealing. It would also be interesting to see if the type of lettuce, rather than its colour is important. I've sowed 'Rubens Red', a large Coss-type with dark green leaves overlaid with red and I'll compare its life expectancy with a green hearting variety, 'Buttercrunch'. Do the slugs keep snug inside a red or green heart, or both?

If slugs are more exposed when chomping loose-leaf varieties, do they risk life and limb on 'Red Batavian' or the green oakleaved 'Catalogna'? It will be amusing to see if colour is important to molluscs. I suspect they'll make do with 'Rubens Red' if that's all there is, but we'll see.

Like slugs, we've had a long history of enjoying lettuce, dating back to the Ancient Egyptians. At first, they made oil from lettuce seed, but by 2680BCE they were breeding selectively for larger and better leaves. Unsurprisingly, lettuce also had religious connotations and was used in sacrifices to the god, Min. Apparently he 'performed the sexual act untiringly' after consuming lettuce<sup>2</sup>. More mundanely, the Egyptians first bred the Romaine or Cos lettuce which was later adopted by Greeks and Romans.

By the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, gardeners in mainland Europe were planting the 3 main types of lettuce we eat today. In 1586, German academic and botanist, Joachim Camerarius, described heading lettuce, loose-leaf and Romaine or Cos ones. When Justice was writing two hundred years later, he listed 10 varieties, including an Egyptian green Cos. Interestingly, like many writers of this and later times, he valued lettuce 'for the kitchen' as well as for 'sallads'.

Justice reckoned that, while there were several more types on the market, his ten were the only ones worth considering. But Victorian seedsmen thought very differently. They bombarded hapless gardeners with a bewildering choice every year, believing new was always best. They didn't seem to care whether there was any difference between the old and the new and probably gave the same variety several different names.

This does make me wonder if we could be in danger of playing the Victorian game. Perhaps the European Register of seed varieties is not as bad as it's often portrayed. Custodians of heirloom varieties complain that they can't afford to register heritage varieties and that only big seed companies have funds to do this. The genetic pool is thereby diminished by commercial interests. Of course, this is partly true. Gardening fashions change and some interesting old varieties could sadly be lost. But it's also possible that some varieties may be known by different names and the genetic pool isn't as large as is often claimed.

<sup>1</sup>James Justice: 'The Scots gardiner's director'. 1754.

<sup>2</sup>George Hart: 'The Routledge Dictionary of Egyptian Gods and Goddesses'. 2005.

#### When to sow and grow lettuce

Hearting lettuce can be sown in seed trays from March till May and planted out once 4 true leaves have formed. Plant in full sun in moderately rich soil, 20cm apart. Cut the bottom of a plastic pot and put a line of Vaseline round the edge of the pot to protect young lettuces from slugs. Direct sow cut and come again varieties by drawing out a shallow line, removing the rose from a watering can, then watering and sowing seed thinly. Cover seed with a thin layer of soil. Lettuces don't tolerate high summer temperatures and will readily bolt, so do not sow in June or July.

Start sowing winter varieties, as for early summer ones, during August. Although hardy, they do need protection over winter, so plant in polytunnels, greenhouses or under cloches. [The 16<sup>th</sup> Century French gardener, Nicholas de Bonnefons, even suggested that lettuce safely overwinter in beds below espaliered fruit trees and James Justice reckoned a wall provided enough shelter.