

Special Salads from Your Garden

We grow what we like to eat, and to the stage at which we like to eat it. That is the beauty of having our own gardens. It is our personal, living market containing not only our favorite vegetables, but the precise varieties we favor.

While most of the garden is dedicated to proven and preferred vegetables, another part can grow new adventures in plants and flavors. Do the varieties Castelfranco, Mache, Sugarloaf, Arugula, Augusto, Magnet, Endive Frisee, Green Ice, Rouge de Verona, Cosmo and Aldo stimulate the palate? They might if you enjoy fresh salads and could keep track of the many varieties of leaf crops being introduced to the garden trade. For a better appreciation of these crops, we should return to the basics, the sort of elemental information you received when you have just begun planting beans and tomatoes.

CHICORIES are grown by gardeners for their diversity of leaf tissue. Witloof chicory, also named French or Belgian endive, has long appeared in our seed catalogs but without great popularity. The ritual of growing Witloof seems complex, but offers the reward of tasty winter salad leaves. The crop needs four to five months of growth in the garden. The roots are harvested just after the first frost, so count back five months from that average frost date to plant the crop. Seed sparingly and thin to six inches between plants soon after they emerge. Pulled seedlings will not transplant well because of the long tap root. Witloof is generally hardy and requires only occasional watering, a side-dress of potassium but no nitrogen, and to be free of weeds. The plants can form a large amount of top growth but it is the roots, and hopefully large ones, you harvest from the garden. At harvest, cut off the leaves one inch from the root top and store cool and moist as you would carrots. To produce the thin, white Witloof head, trim a few roots to six inches removing excess from the lower part. Stand the roots up close together in a bushel basket or large pot and surround them with sand or light soil. Water moderately. Cover the top of the plant with about six inches of sand to exclude light and provide pressure to force the head to remain tight. At 55 degrees F, in about three weeks the blanched heads or chicons are ready to harvest. Roots should produce two or three chicons each. There is little variety selection in the U.S. except Zoom, which forms an attractive tight head without being covered with sand.

Other types of chicory produce their edible leaves in the garden, although large roots of radicchio can be forced in the manner of Witloof. Easiest to manage are the green leaf types such as Sugarloaf and Crystal Hat. The harvest stage in the fall looks similar to a crisp, smooth cos lettuce. If planted in spring, plants will not form heads but the loose leaves can be picked every two to three weeks. Plants seeded or allowed to grow after midsummer will form large tall heads, with a sweeter taste than in summer. This chicory is not hardy and roots may rot in a cold, wet winter. Cut off all leaves and provide good drainage or a row cover. Long Island gardeners have a good chance to overwinter roots of Sugarloaf and produce a spring crop. Better results for overwintering have come from late seeding or transplants.

RADICCHIO is the most prized chicory of all, typically a small head of red leaves with white ribbing. Its placement in salads adds beauty and a fresh exotic taste. Seeding or transplanting should be accomplished mid-to late summer to permit good leaf and root growth by the first frost. At that time, cut off leaves one inch above the crown. Re-growth in the cool weather promotes head and color formation. Verona has short round leaves and develops good color. Treviso forms a more tapered head due to its long, strap-like leaves. Castelfranco

develops a round heart and green-speckled-with-red leaves. Most seed sources showed wide variation in plant types, vigor and color. The exception was Augusto variety from Jonnnys' with excellent early color and heading. Leaves are most tender and delicious inside the heads.

Radicchio is sensitive to the rigors of being overwintered. Covering with a cloche will help to make a spring harvest possible. Also, if transplanted very early, a harvest might be possible before heat causes flowering. At that stage you will see the exacting similarity between this delicious and coveted garden plant and the blue-flowered, roadside weed chicory.

ENDIVE is only a species away from chicory. Where lettuce performs poorly in midsummer, endive resists flowering and if blanched has a good flavor. It is seeded in the spring with the lettuce. When the plant is large, the leaves are pulled up and a rubber band or string wrapped around the leaf tips similar to blanching cauliflower. In one to two weeks the endive center is a pale green and the normal heat-produced bitterness is gone. Green curled is a typical variety, Aldo is a new and small plant type, and the smooth leaf escarole is called Batavian and Deep Heart.

Chicories, which are most hardy to our winters such as Spadona and Grumola, are the least desirable due to their leaf type or taste.

ARUGULA is in the mustard (cabbage) family and, used sparingly, adds a tang to salads. It grows best with mild flavor in early spring and fall, and can be cut and re-grown several times. Through the summer, frequent plantings with only one cutting from each are made because tartness develops so quickly in the heat. It easily goes to flower and seeds itself.

MACHE or **CORN SALAD** can be seeded or transplanted in late summer. It grows well only in very cool weather. It is a small plant type and many will be needed if you develop a taste for it. As with all these salad crops, their own interesting tastes should be enhanced with light vinaigrette dressing instead of the overwhelming creamy types we use on crisphead lettuce.

PARSLEY can be planted in the spring and it will produce sprigs all summer and fall. A very early planting may cause flower initiation and stop leaf production. Some can be left to overwinter in the garden, which will offer several leaf harvests the next spring before the plants go to flower.

These greens add such a revelation to the taste and appearance of salads, in a short time most seed companies will find it profitable to offer them. For the present, the following list shows reliable sources of seed tested at Cornell.

- The Cook's Garden, Box 65, Londonderry, VT 05148
- Epicure Seed Ltd. P.O. Box 450. Brewster, NY 10509
- Johnny's Selected Seeds, Albion, ME 04910
- LeMarche' Seeds Int., P.O. Box 566. Dixon, CA 95620
- Seeds Blum, Idaho City Stage, Boise, ID 83706
- Stokes Seeds, Ltd., Box 548, Buffalo, NY 14240
- Thompson and Morgan, P.O. Box 1308, Jackson, NJ 08527

Resource: Kline, Roger A. "Special Salads From Your Garden." *Long Island Gardening* March 1986: 3-4.

TK 11/2008 AW:1/2012 AR:11/2024