

The information offered here is to help gardeners grow vegetables successfully. It focuses on common questions asked as well as conditions, pests, and diseases that occur in St. Tammany Parish home gardens. Every attempt has been made to ensure the accuracy of the information, but references should always be checked, and LSU AgCenter personnel contacted if there are questions.

Lettuce

A Trouble-free Garden Boon

By Jerry Ballanco



Oak leaf, red leaf, romaine, and bib lettuce. Photo by Jerry Ballanco.

"It ain't what you don't know that causes trouble...it's what you know that ain't so."

Introduction

LETTUCE WILL GROW IN ST. TAMMANY from September until May. It has few requirements and may be harvested at any stage of development. The varieties of lettuce that are available fit almost any palate or garden color scheme. It grows happily in bed or container and tolerates filtered light, though preferring full sun. Unfortunately, rabbit and deer also love lettuce.

Loose leaf lettuce does better in St. Tammany Parish than firm head varieties. Cos (Romaine), bib (soft head), and loose leaf all do very well.

Soil should be prepared about six weeks before planting by adding $\frac{3}{4}$ pound of 8-24-24 or 13-13-13 to a 25 square foot bed. Side-dressing (periodic feeding) should be done three to four weeks after

planting and two to three weeks after that. Use 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ ounces of ammonium nitrate or three ounces of calcium nitrate to side-dress a 25 square foot bed. Spread the fertilizer and gently till into the top of the soil, then water it in. Most lettuce will mature in 50-60 days but may be harvested at any stage.

Experienced gardeners almost always grow it from seed. It grows so readily that it is an ideal crop for novice gardeners to start growing from seed. Lettuce seeds need light to germinate. That means the seeds should NOT be covered but simply pressed into the soil and misted in. Firm contact with moist, but not wet, soil is important. Usual germination is 5-7 days.



Snails feeding on orange rind. Photo from Gardengate magazine.

Lettuce may be direct seeded in the garden any time after mid-September or started indoors in late August. I am not good about "thinning" plants to grow at correct distances apart, so I do better starting the seeds indoors. Individual lettuces, started indoors are then transplanted at about a month post germination, spacing them 8 inches apart in the garden. It is also useful to plant several seedlings, wait two to three weeks, then plant another group. Continue that cycle through the spring for continuous availability of fresh lettuce. You may wish to plant two to three times as many seeds as you want heads of lettuce. Depending on the germination and survival, give away the seedlings or, if early and space is available, plant them all and harvest some as baby greens. Mark your calendar to remind you to seed the next contingent of lettuces to make harvest available until May or early June (when it usually bolts or turns bitter). [When a plant goes to seed much faster than expected, it is called bolting.]

The primary, and often the only pest, are garden slugs and snails. Chemicals are not recommended for these pests. They are rather easily trapped by one of two means. Beer poured into a shallow container where the rim is almost level with the soil is effective. Put it out in the early evening. Attracted by the smell of the yeast in the beer, slugs and snails go into the beer and drown. A hollowed out citrus peel also works but requires harvesting and killing the animals. A second method puts a brick or piece of wood on the ground between plants. Slugs and snails use it for shelter during the day and come out at night to feed, returning to that shelter near daybreak. The slugs may be harvested in the morning from the bottom of the board or brick by scraping them into soapy water or simply smashed. Do not shoo toads away as they will eat slugs and snails. Non-venomous snakes will too but that is a big ask for many. Some gardeners put a copper collar around the plants as slugs are reluctant to crawl over copper.

If lettuce is left in the garden too long past maturity, slugs may enter the inner leaf spaces and remain there. Finding slugs when you are washing lettuce is not pleasant, but at least they do not make it to the salad.

Few diseases bother lettuce. Perhaps the most common disease occurs when there is too much moisture resulting in root rot. Though considered "most common," root rot is actually quite unusual. In fact, lettuce may be the most trouble-free crop that grows in St. Tammany, second only to scallions.

