Lettuce



http://www.gofor2and5.com.au/Guide.aspx?c=1&a=6&S=15&1=53&n=185

Scientific Classification and Etymology

Lettuce is a member of the Asteraceae family, formerly known as the compositae family. Thousands of species are included in the large family. The family was originally referred to as compositae because the species all seemed to share a compact structure often sprouting in the shape of a head.¹ The scientific name for common cultivated lettuce is *Lactuca sativa L. "Lactuca* means 'milk forming', *sativa* means 'common'".² I imagine that lettuce is considered 'milk forming' because of the creamy substance that is often found when you snap the stem. Think of the dandelion for example, believe it or not but the dandelion is closely related to lettuce.³

Historical Importance

A salad before dinner is common healthy habit that has existed long enough that one would see no reason to question it. High status Romans even ate salads before dinner as

¹ Rubatzky, Vincent and Mas Yamaguchi. World Vegetables: Principles, Production, and Nutritive Values. Second Edition. (New York: Chapman and Hall, 1997)

² Weaver, William Woys. *Heirloom Vegetable Gardening*. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997), 170-189.

³ Kiple, Kenneth and Kriemhild Ornelas eds. *The Cambridge World History of Food*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1801.

early as 81-96 A.D..⁴ Like other cultivated vegetables, lettuce over the years has not remained the same; its form and use has altered drastically to accommodate ever changing and demanding humans. Fortunately for us the ancient Egyptians incorporated lettuce into their religious practices and therefore lettuce (in less recognizable form) was included in ancient art that is now helpful in researching the history of the vegetable.⁵

Horticulture and Plant Specifics

The common cultivated species of lettuce, *Lactuca. sativa*, has its origin traced back to the Eastern Mediterranean basin.⁶ Now that it is a cultivated crop lettuce can be found growing all over the world. Lettuce is considered annual and polymorphic. An annual plant has a life span of only one year; it must be replanted every year if desired for cultivation. As a polymorphic plant lettuce can take on a wide variety of appearances in its final stage of growth.⁷ Within *Lactuca sativa* there are four groups of popular types of lettuces, and iceberg lettuce.⁸ Although all types can be found in a typical salad today, each group appears fairly different and is more used more specifically for different purposes. For example, romaine is often the base of a Caesar salad while iceberg lettuce is often found in a "tossed garden salad" as it is often named on a restaurant's menu.

The leaves of a lettuce plant are representative of the species polymorphic characteristic. Lettuce leaves are typically hairless but can be described as smooth, savoy, or crumpled.⁹ Savoy is defined in the online version of the Merriam Webster dictionary under "savoy cabbage," the leaves are described as wrinkled and curled.¹⁰ The leaves of a lettuce plant also vary in shades of green ranging from a very dark green to a light almost white green; some lettuce leaves are even purple. Even each of the earlier named groups of lettuces there is significant variety. The garden lettuce or loose-leaf lettuce group grows in a "tight rosette cluster". The leaves are frail and fragile and must be handled gently once harvested. Garden lettuce does not keep well after harvesting, even when kept refrigerated. Romaine or cos lettuce has long dark green leaves that grow tall rather than rounded into the shape of a head. The leaves have more of a crunch than the loose leafed lettuces are named as such because of the creamy taste. The leaves grow in the shape of a head but are not

- ⁶ Rubatzky, Vincent and Mas Yamaguchi. World Vegetables: Principles, Production, and Nutritive Values. Second Edition. (New York: Chapman and Hall, 1997)
- ⁷ Rubatzky, Vincent and Mas Yamaguchi. World Vegetables: Principles, Production, and Nutritive Values. Second Edition. (New York: Chapman and Hall, 1997)
- ⁸ Kiple, Kenneth and Kriemhild Ornelas eds. *The Cambridge World History of Food.* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1801.
- ⁹ Rubatzky, Vincent and Mas Yamaguchi. World Vegetables: Principles, Production, and Nutritive Values. Second Edition. (New York: Chapman and Hall, 1997)

⁴ Weaver, William Woys. *Heirloom Vegetable Gardening*. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997), 170-189.

⁵ Weaver, William Woys. *Heirloom Vegetable Gardening*. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997), 170-189.

¹⁰ Merriam-Webster OnLine Dictionary. <u>http://www.merriam-webster.com</u> 2005.

tightly compacted. The leaves of iceberg lettuce on the other hand form a very compact head shape. In the center of the head are the youngest and lightest colored leaves; as inner leaves continue to sprout the head becomes larger and if never harvested, it can eventually burst.¹¹

The roots of a lettuce plant are not quite as diverse as the leaf structure is. The roots grow more abundantly in a horizontal direction than they do in a vertical direction. The only exception is the taproot that grows straight down into the soil. The taproot however is not as useful as the other roots in absorbing essential nutrients and therefore lettuce often has a difficult time acquiring sufficient amounts of water with its shallow root system.¹²

Cultivation

When growing lettuce in a garden it is important to plant the seeds 12 to 14 inches apart so they have room for the heads to fully form.¹³ Cultivated lettuce has a number of varieties that are best broken down into three categories for the purpose of planting: winter lettuces, spring lettuces, and summer lettuces.¹⁴

Winter varieties should be planted in August or September. The snow cover does not harm the lettuce. In April or May when the snow has melted the lettuce heads will begin to appear. The lettuce will provide leaves for up to two additional months.¹⁵ Spring varieties should be planted in March on a bed of compost. By May or June the plants are ready for cutting.¹⁶

Summer variety seeds should be planted anywhere between March and July. When the seedlings formed the worst ones should be picked out and discarded while the others should be arranged a good distance apart. The plants must be watered frequently and a layer of mulch on the soil is helpful in keeping it cool.¹⁷

Nutrition

All types of lettuce do not provide the same nutritional benefits. Iceberg lettuce for example has a high water content and therefore less nutritional value. Most types of

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¹² Rubatzky, Vincent and Mas Yamaguchi. World Vegetables: Principles, Production, and Nutritive Values. Second Edition. (New York: Chapman and Hall, 1997)

 ¹³ Weaver, William Woys. *Heirloom Vegetable Gardening*. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997), 170-189.

¹⁴ Vilmorin-Andrieux, MM. *The Vegetable Garden*. (California: Ten Speed Press), 287-315.

¹⁵ Vilmorin-Andrieux, MM. *The Vegetable Garden*. (California: Ten Speed Press), 287-315.

¹⁶ Vilmorin-Andrieux, MM. *The Vegetable Garden*. (California: Ten Speed Press), 287-315.

¹⁷ Vilmorin-Andrieux, MM. *The Vegetable Garden*. (California: Ten Speed Press), 287-315.

lettuce, even iceburg, do provide magnesium. Other types of lettuce also provide vitamin C and beta-carotene. 18

Medicinal Uses

Durring the 17th century fresh lettuce was used as an aphrodisiac along with "purslane and mint with vinegar."¹⁹

Culinary

Lettuce is commonly used fresh in salads or sandwiches, but it can be prepared in other ways as well. Lettuce can be "braised or creamed."²⁰ Some people will not just eat the lettuce leaves but will consume the seeds of the lettuce plant as well.²¹

¹⁸ Kiple, Kenneth and Kriemhild Ornelas eds. *The Cambridge World History of Food*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1801.

¹⁹ Kiple, Kenneth and Kriemhild Ornelas eds. <u>The Cambridge World History of Food</u>. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1801.

²⁰ Kiple, Kenneth and Kriemhild Ornelas eds. *The Cambridge World History of Food*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1801.

²¹ Kiple, Kenneth and Kriemhild Ornelas eds. *The Cambridge World History of Food*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1801.