

Grow a Rainbow of Spring Greens

by Vera Strader

You can grow a rainbow of leafy greens in our cool spring weather. Planted early, salad makings thrive without turning bitter as they do once the heat hits. Many greens are so strikingly colorful—red, yellow, orange, magenta, and green, too—they can be planted as ornamentals. On top of that, they pack a top-quality nutrition punch.

PLANTING TIPS

You can purchase veggie seedlings from the nursery. But, for a greater variety, grow your own; it's cheaper, too. Start seeds inside during February and early March, a bit later at elevations above 2500 ft. Move these seedlings to a bright window or sheltered patio as soon as they sprout.



Colored rows of lettuce.

Plant outside when the weather begins to moderate. Greens will tolerate light frost. Look for a spot near the kitchen so they will be easily harvested during a late downpour. A bed near the back door or containers on the patio are perfect. Garden catalogs and nursery seed racks offer smaller veggies suited to containers. Use a light, water-retentive commercial soil mix or amend native soil with plenty of compost.

You can also make a speedy bed with a large bag of commercial planting soil. Punch drainage holes in the back side; lay the bag down and cut a rectangle through the bag on the top, leaving just enough plastic to hold the soil in place. Now you're ready to plant a dozen or more lettuce seedlings, a couple rows of radishes, or other small-growing crops. At the end of the season, recycle the used soil into your garden.

Mulch beds and containers lightly and keep moist when the rains diminish. Row covers can provide shelter when the thermometer plunges and also protect greens from birds and other critters. As weather warms, add a shade cover or move pots to a sheltered spot to delay bolting (going to seed) and turning bitter.

When harvesting lettuce and other leafy greens, use the cut-and-come-again method, trimming leaves an inch or so above the soil. Plants will then regrow for two, even three, cuttings.

GREENS TO GROW

- **Lettuce** is queen of the salad greens with enticing names like 'Red Fire' and 'Green Ice'. Choose from loose-leaf, butter head, romaine, or a mesclun mix that includes other leafy greens. Some lettuces, notably romaine, are heat resistant.
- **Bok choy** or Chinese cabbage, particularly the small varieties like joi choy or pac choy, sprout quickly and grow well in pots. They are members of the cabbage family so

watch for little, green cabbage worms, larvae of the white cabbage butterfly. Hand-pick or use Bt, a spray just for caterpillars. Row covers also deter infestation.

- **Kale** is one of the prettiest greens, with often frilly, ruffled leaves in grays, reds, and greens.
- **Swiss chard** can have colorful leaves and contrasting ribbed veins. “Bright Lights,” with many-colored stems, is tasty and eye-catching.
- **Radicchio** or red chicory yields showy somewhat bitter-tasting leaves that add salad crunch and color. You can also cook the leaves or entire heads. Let it bloom at season’s end for striking three-foot tall flower stalks.
- **Other greens** including arugula, endive, and purslane, are great salad additions. Also look for “miners’ lettuce,” a tender green that thrives in our fields and roadsides. Be sure it is pesticide-free before picking.
- **Radishes** and their young tops too, add pizzazz to salads. Direct sow outdoors without the necessity of starting seed indoors first.
- **Edible Flowers** contribute flavor and eye appeal. Arugula and bok choy blossoms are tasty and calendula petals and viola blossoms add great color. Be sure all are grown without toxic chemicals.



Radicchio

Plant greens soon; check best dates for your elevation at <http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.org/files/114705.pdf> or contact the Master Gardener Hotline at 209-533-5912, mgtuolumne@ucdavis.edu.

Vera Strader grows vegetables year-round in her Sonora garden.