



Growing salads

1 LEAFY SALAD TYPES

There are three different categories of leafy salad: wholehead, baby leaf and speciality.

Wholehead as the name implies, refers to plants such as lettuces, where a 'whole head' of produce is grown.

Baby leaf refers to those plants which grow as individual leaves, such as rocket or spinach.

Speciality, sometimes known as continental, is lettuces such as Batavia or Lollo Rosso, which are derived from European varieties.

2 GROWING AREAS

The European climate is particularly suitable for salad production, as leafy salads grow best in an even temperature. If the climate is too hot, many lettuce varieties such as iceberg will go to seed.

There are approximately 14,000 acres of salad farms in the UK stretching across the Vale of Evesham, the South Coast, East Anglia, Lancashire, Lincolnshire and Hampshire. Leafy salads are suited to temperatures ranging from 12-18 degrees, which is why many producers are near the coast as the coastal breeze helps keep the temperatures down.

The outdoor grown UK leafy salad season runs from April to November and glasshouse produced lettuce is available year round. Lettuce crops are imported from many different EU countries outside the UK growing season. Today there are around 60 different types of salads grown commercially.

3 FROM SEED TO SHELF

Wholeheads/speciality are grown from seed in trays and are kept in glasshouses for the first few weeks of their life, depending on the crop. Once a young plant has grown, the crop is then planted in the field. In approximately 6-11 weeks depending on the time of year, the lettuce is then ready to harvest.

Baby leaf salad is sown straight into the field with a machine called a seed drill. One seed produces approximately 6-7 leaves and the seeds usually grow to optimum size in as little as 3-8 weeks, depending on the time of year.

Lettuces and leaves are highly sensitive crops, susceptible to weather, pest and disease damage. Lettuce cannot be planted if it is too wet and if the conditions are too hot or cold this can affect the yield and leaf quality. Harvesting the crop at the right time is vital, if it's left too long, the 'core' or 'stalk' will grow too big, this is the



early stages of bolting. The crop will go to seed in excessively high temperatures, or if left in the ground too long, which affects the flavour and appearance.

Keeping the farming process efficient and work with the environment begins with the seed. Huge investment has been made by seed companies and growers over the past fifty years in natural plant breeding programmes to produce varieties with a higher resistance to pests, disease and variable weather conditions.

Natural predators such as ladybirds are also encouraged in fields to help keep pest numbers, like aphids, down. Weather conditions are monitored closely, with temperature and moisture sensors planted in the soil. Fleece blankets are placed over crops to protect them when conditions are particularly cold in the early spring.

In order to take care of the land on which the growers depend, wide margins between crops and the hedgerows are created and managed to provide natural habitats for pollinating insects, wildlife and fauna. Many salad farms across the country are part of environment friendly farming schemes such as LEAF (Linking Environment and Farming) and Natural England's Higher Level Stewardship Scheme. This means they are recognised for producing food while taking care of the environment.

All types of lettuce are harvested and checked for quality within an average of 2.5 hours and as little as half an hour. Crops are taken straight from the field to an onsite cold store where it is rapidly cooled and kept between 2-5 degrees to maintain freshness.

In the case of wholehead, it is packed in the field before being taken to the cold store and is then dispatched within 24 hours in refrigerated vehicles to stores like Tesco, Asda, Sainsbury and Waitrose.

If wholehead is being taken to a salad packer, it is taken in refrigerated vehicles and checked again for quality and cut (if required), washed and bagged - some bagged salads are also unwashed so it's important to check the label before eating. This washing, drying and packing happens as quickly as possible in order to help maintain freshness.

After a great deal of care and attention, from seed and farm to packer; leafy salads, whether wholehead or bagged, make their way to the retailer in as little as 24 hours – ready to be enjoyed by you.