



Planting and Planning: Growing Lettuce in the Summer

Now that summer is officially here, we'd like to address one of the Pittsburgh region's gardening ironies. In the heat of summer, when it's too hot to turn on the oven or even stovetop, and a salad would fit the bill, the lettuce won't grow!

Lettuce is a cool season crop and does best in the spring and fall. In the heat, it often fails to germinate, or gets bitter and "bolts" (grows a long stalk and seed head). But, if you're absolutely set on growing some for summer salads, here are some suggestions to help.

1. **Seed salad mix on every couple of weeks.** Choose a part of your garden, or a large container, and sprinkle some seeds in a new section of it on a regular basis. Some of the seeds will germinate some of the time, providing you with a staggered harvest. When any of the seeded lettuce gets to "baby lettuce" size (3-4" tall), cut it, leaving about 1" at the base, and allow it to regrow for another cutting or two.
2. **Choose heat-resistant varieties.** Some types of lettuce handle heat better than others. Check seed catalogs or packets for varieties that are more suited for heat.
3. **Germinate seeds inside.** If you have the setup for it and are excited about the process, start your lettuce seeds in a cool spot inside (remember that lettuce is one of the few vegetables that needs light to germinate). Harden off, then transplant your seedlings outside after they develop true leaves.
4. **Plant in a cool spot.** If you have options of where to plant, avoid planting lettuce near heat-retaining materials like brick or asphalt. Instead, opt for a spot in the garden near grass or other plants. Lettuce can handle a little bit of shade, so planting it below a tall crop like vining peas or pole beans can be a great pairing.
5. **Consider shade cloth.** Garden shade cloth is commercially available, or buy black netting from a fabric store. Lettuce can grow with 30-50% shade.

If you want to avoid the trouble of growing lettuce in the summer, source your salad supplies from the farmer's market (let the farmers worry about how they'll get summer lettuce to grow!). Otherwise, try the above tips and see what works for you and your garden. Happy growing!



Lettuce growing under shade cloth in Johnny's Selected Seeds test garden.