

Growing Salads Organically

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Introduction

From the excitement of seeing the first seedling emerge from the earth to the taste of your own freshly picked produce, every stage of growing food is both fascinating and very rewarding. Growing your own salads is one of the easiest, economical and quickest crops to grow.

- You can cut as much or as little as you need, when you need it with no more waste. As you are picking and eating them in a short time frame all those lovely vitamins and goodness are still in the leaves.
- They will be different from most of those for sale, much livelier, brighter, crisper, more colourful and with plenty of exciting taste to enjoy, and you will know exactly what has and has not been added.
- Locally produced food is much more environmentally friendly and you can't get much more local than your home.

This step-by-step guide is designed for absolute beginners and will help to get you started. Another good thing about growing salads is that if you go wrong you can learn from your mistakes and try again in only a few weeks. As you apply tips from this guide and make your own observations it will soon become second nature.

Please Note:

This guide has been produced by Mark Donaldson. The advice provided is solely from him and in no way should this guide be considered a product of or an endorsement from Islington Council.

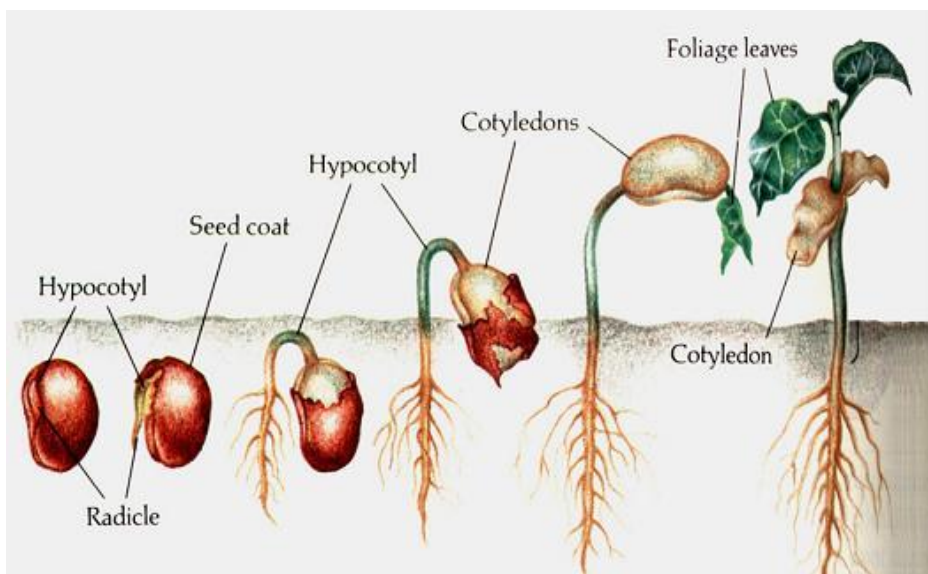
Mark Donaldson would like to thank Charles Downing (<http://www.charlesdowding.co.uk>) whose excellent recent publication: 'Salad Leaves for all Seasons - Organic Growing from Pot to Plot' has been a constant reference throughout the writing of this guide.

Salad leaves & seeds

Loose leaf salads for container growing

When you mention salad, many people imagine an iceberg lettuce. This is a “head” lettuce, i.e. it has a large ball of leaves. However there are a great many varieties of lettuce and other salads which are called “loose leaf”. They develop individual leaves, rather than a head of leaves. This is far better for growing in containers as they do not require as much space as the larger “head” varieties. They can be harvested over a period of time, pulling just a few leaves when required while leaving the rest to keep growing, and are often referred to as “cut-and-come-again” types. This guide will focus on loose leaf salads, but many of the same advice can be applied to “head” varieties.

Life Cycle of a Salad plant



Seasonal sowing

Best results come from appreciating which plants grow best at which time of the year. Growing plants in their right season will give you far more success than if you sow anything you fancy at any time of the year. For example, spinach and lettuce grow best in the spring, purslane and basil require summer heat, endives and mizuna thrive in the autumn, while chicories, rocket and lamb’s lettuce are hardy enough to provide leaves in most British winters.

A seasonal approach achieves more abundant harvest and healthier leaves, because insects that live off certain plants are only prevalent at certain times: avoid growing in those periods and growth will be healthier.

An extra benefit of this approach is the constantly changing nature of your harvests. Salad is not the same old thing, day in day out, for months on end. April’s leaves are quite different from August’s, while many leaves in a bowl of late autumn salad, for example, are quite peculiar to that season and are suited to boosting your health as winter approaches.

Growing Chart

Use the chart to plan for a continuous supply of young salad leaves.

	When to Sow	Germination time (weeks)	Cuts	Lasts (months)
Leaf amaranthus	W	< 1	2	2-3
Winter purslane	W	2-3	2-3	2-3
Summer purslane	W	2-3	2-3	2
Orache	A	2-3	3	3
Perpetual spinach	A	2-3	3+	6+
Red mustard	A	< 1	2	2-3
Salad rape	A	< 1	3-4	3-4
Fine-leaved kale	A	1-3	3-4	6-8+
Komatsuna	A	1-3	3-4	4+
Curled endive	A	2-3	2-3	3-4
Loaf chicory	A	2-3	2-3	3-4
'Salad bowl' and cutting lettuce	A	2-3	2-3	3-4
Alfalfa	A	< 1	2-4	12+
Buck's horn plantain	A	< 1	2	6-8
Leaf and seedling radish	A	< 1	2	1-2
Spinach	A	2-3	3-4	2-5
Saladini/Mesclun	A	2-3	2-3	3-4
Texsel greens	C	2-3	2	2-3
Curly Kale	C	2-3	2-3	6-8+
Pak Choi	C	< 1	2-3	2-4
Mibuna greens	C	2-3	2	3+
Mizuna greens	C	2-3	3-4	4+
Salad rocket	C	< 1	3-5	2-3
Garden cress	C	< 1	2-5	1-2
Corn salad	C	< 1	2-3	3+
Oriental saladini	C	< 1	3-4	2-5

W: best sown in warm conditions.

C: best sown in cool conditions.

A: can be sown all throughout the year.

Germination time: the average time (under favourable conditions) before the seedling appears above the ground.

Lasts: the average period in months during which the crop can provide tender leaves.

Cuts: The average number of cuts from one sowing. This will vary according to season. Most loose salad leaf crops run to seed rapidly in hot weather, and grow more slowly in cold weather, limiting the number of cuts.

Flavours

There are also many different varieties of salad to choose from - whether you prefer light, mild crunchy lettuces or peppery and more bitter leaves, the chances are that there's a salad out there to suit your tastes.

Certain groups of leaves share many taste characteristics.

- The mildest flavours are found in young, small leaves. Stronger flavours develop as the leaves grow, especially in the cabbage family.
- With the changing seasons come frequent and fascinating changes in salad flavour. Autumn and winter leaves are usually stronger in flavour.
- The larger cabbage family is characterised by spicy, mustard character, more pronounced as leaves grow larger and older.
- Chicories and endives possess a range of flavours but are all more or less bitter, especially as leaves rather than hearts.
- Plants of spinach and beets have strongly flavoured and rather metallic-tasting leaves.
- There is a most interesting group of other leaves which boasts some appealing tastes such as pea shoots, purslane and lamb's lettuce.

Mild flavour (mildest at top)	Some heat	Hot mustard
Lamb's lettuce, Chinese cabbage Lettuce Purslane Pea shoots, Mizuna, Red Russian kale, Mitsuba, Spinach, Chards (A), Tatsoi, Endives, Chicories (B) Parsley Chervil Basil Sorrel (A)	Leaf radish Pak choi Komatsuna, Mibuna Dill	Rocket Ruby Streaks Golder Streaks Red Giant Green in the Snow Cress Coriander

Key: A = Acid, B = Bitter

Types of seed

Seeds come in packets containing an individual variety or a mixture. A ready made mixture is often the simplest way to provide a range of flavours to your salad harvest. These are often labelled “strong” or “mild”, but you can also find oriental, Italian and French and other mixtures. However, at different times of the year some of the seed varieties may do better and smother out the weaker ones.

Most new varieties are ‘F1 hybrids’, made by crossing two parent lines that have been inbred for several generations. Compared to standard ‘open-pollinated’ varieties, the resulting hybrid plants have exceptional vigour, quality and uniformity, often coupled with useful disease resistance.

Alternatively, there are many heritage seeds now available for purchase. These seeds have been developed through allowing plants to grow naturally and adapt to a changing environment.

Organic seeds are those which have been harvested from plants grown under organic conditions.

Seed savings

After a period of growing, all salads will stop producing leaves and form a flower and seed pods. These can be left to dry and the seeds harvested. However, as salad seeds are cheap to buy, it is often not worth leaving the plants in the containers beyond when they produce a good supply of leaves. Also, if the salad is a hybrid variety the seeds will not produce the same salad plant they grew from and may be quite inferior.

Seed packets

Seed packets provide a very general guide on when to sow and how to sow. The information is designed mostly for growing in the ground, rather than containers. In containers, salads can be grown far closer together for smaller leaves.

The fresher the seeds the better, but if they are a year or two old just sow extras in case they don't all germinate. Store in a dry and cool place, preferably in an air-tight container. After opening a packet turn up the cut edges to keep them air tight.

Where to buy seeds:

- Local shops, especially DIY stores.
- Local Nurseries (these offer in bulks as well).
- Other gardeners (trading seeds is a great option here).
- Mail Ordering and online (there are over a dozen catalogues out there that offer seeds delivered to your door).

Where to grow salads

Sunlight

Most salads prefer plenty of light in order to thrive. A position that is completely open to the south or southwest is best, southeast or west are the next best. Take care during summer though to ensure salads are not too exposed to the strong midday sun.

Some salads prefer shade and others will tolerate shade but produce less. When light levels are insufficient, seeds may germinate but when the seedlings start to grow they will develop long and fragile stems and not produce a decent size plant.

The following table provides a basic guide for some common herbs and salads:

Require Full Sun (6+ hours of sun per day)	Full sun or light shade	Tolerate Partial Shade (3-6 hours sun per day)
Basil Oregano / marjoram French Tarragon Rosemary Thyme Sage	Coriander Dill Parsley Fennel Mint Sorrel	Mizuna Rocket Mustard Chervil Chives Garlic Chives

Suitable Locations

Take some time to observe where there is full and partial sunlight, and how you can use the space to grow different salads within reach for regular watering and harvesting. Salads and herbs can be grown in even the smallest of spaces and containers of all kinds of shapes and sizes can be used, so you don't even need a garden.

- Balconies and sunny window sills: ideally faces the south or southeast and gets at least five hours of sunlight per day. Try to avoid any major drafts.
- In the ground: tuck in herbs and salads between existing plants, clear the way for a dedicated salad bed or herb garden, or construct an easy to reach raised bed.
- In pots and other containers: against a sunny wall close to the kitchen is a handy location.
- Hanging and wall baskets: can be really useful where space is at a premium.

Salads can be grown indoors or outdoors, providing there is sufficient light. If you are intending to grow outdoors you may want to start them off on a bright window sill and take them out when ready. Plants often benefit from a warmer location in the first two weeks in order to germinate and establish themselves, especially when it's a bit cold outside in late winter and early spring.

Protection

Some form of protection from the cold and wind (those from the north and north east in Britain) can make a big difference during winter and spring. You can buy many types of transparent shelters, such as cold frames, cloches, polytunnels, and green houses. Or you can build your own, often from materials which are commonly found dumped on the streets, such as window panes, plastic sheets and bubble wrap.

Containers

Many things can be used as a container for growing salads, as long as they can hold enough soil and provide good drainage. Almost anything that can retain water will do - from a simple plastic window box to a recycled wooden wine case, old galvanised bucket, the choice will depend on the space you have available, how much you would like to grow, and what kind of container you like the look of.

Examples

- Large containers, such as pots and troughs, allow long-term, regular cropping of many leaf types.
- Window boxes and trays of shallow compost are more suited to baby or very small leaves, sometimes called micro or living leaves.
- Grow-bags are more difficult because they offer sanctuary to slugs.
- Hanging baskets, wall hanging half baskets or pots or hanging pouches can also be used as long as they are in easy reach. Hanging baskets do dry out quickly in warm weather so be prepared for regularly trips with the watering can. It's also best to try to position them out of strong winds as this will also dry them out very quickly.

The stuff other people throw away can often make for the best and most interesting containers, e.g. plastic food trays from local shops, crocks, urns, aquariums, tanks, tubs, barrels, pots, bowls, hanging baskets, pans, cans, rocks, chimney tiles, wire cages, cement blocks, wicker baskets, wire baskets, wooden baskets and boxes, laundry tubs, wheelbarrows, wringer washing machine, old boots, stone troughs, etc. You are limited only by your imagination.

Size and depth

- Salads can be grown in quite shallow containers as long as they are well watered in dry weather.
- A minimum of 15 cm depth can provide enough space for reasonable sized salad leaves to develop. There is likely to be little benefit gain from growing salads and most herbs in containers deeper than 60 cm.
- The more compost you can fit in a container, the longer you will be able to crop your salad and the larger the leaves will be.
- Think about how often you may wish to move the container, as some containers will be heavier than others of a similar size made out of a different material.

Materials

Each type of container has its strengths and weaknesses.

- Terracotta and glazed pots breathe moisture from the compost easily, so should be lined with a perforated plastic bag.
- Plastic containers are much lighter to move around and its good durability make is a reasonable ecological choice. Since plastic conducts heat more quickly than clay, roots may be (but in practice rarely are) damaged by heat in summer and frost in winter. A solution for this is 'double glazed', recycled plastic window boxes whose layer of air between the PVC sides acts as a heat buffer.

- Wood is an option, but avoid anything that's been treated as this may leach into the soil.
- Metal may rust and crumble over time..

Drainage

Too much water will result in mildew which can kill seeds and damage plants.. No matter what kind of container you choose, there should be enough holes to allow excess moisture to drain out.

Most plastic window boxes and pots already come with holes, or have ones which simply require punching out with a screwdriver. For terracotta or ceramic pots is a drill, set at a low speed, and a masonry bit. Make a circle of nearly-meeting small holes and then knock out the centre with a sharp blow. For wooden containers use a normal wood bit to drill the hole. The container should then be raised off the ground on stones, bricks or pot feet to make sure water can drain away.

If your container is over 20 cm depth it is also worth adding a layer of broken crocks, polystyrene or gravel to the bottom before filling with compost to help prevent the drainage hole from getting clogged up. To ensure less mess is caused when watering it is useful to be able to put the container onto a tray or slightly larger container in order to capture excess water.

All clay pots, window boxes, strawberry or herbal planters, etc. must be covered completely with water and soaked overnight in order that the dry clay will not draw all the moisture from the damp soil, and harm the plants.



Compost

Most garden soil is unsuitable for containers, as it quickly becomes compacted with frequent watering. The soil mixture should be as 'open' and porous as possible, with a high level of humus. Composts are ideal for growing salads but must be of good quality, especially in small containers. Compost is a mixture of organic matter - material that was once living but is now dead and decaying.

In addition to water, air, and sun, plants require nutrients. The key ones are nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P), and potassium (K). These nutrients ensure the plant is healthy, better able to resist disease and pests and will provide more higher-quality produce. Good compost provides steady moisture and temperature, and sufficient nutrients as plants require them, all over a long period.

Types of compost

There are many different types of compost on sale, with lots of different names and brands. They all fall within three main groups: seed compost, potting compost, and multipurpose compost.

Seed composts are designed to help the seeds germinate. With most herbs and especially with salads you can sow the seeds directly into their final growing place, so there is no need to start off in seed compost.

Potting composts contain higher levels of nutrients and will support actively growing plants for longer. They are usually a bit more expensive than multipurpose, but often contain finer materials, so may be worth the extra. The compost within grow bags can also be used, you can empty this out into a suitable container.

Multipurpose composts contain a balance of nutrients which is sufficient to support growth of mature plants and are good value for money. They may contain some larger bit of material, such as pieces of bark or small twigs. This can sometimes make it more difficult for seedlings to establish themselves, so it may be worth breaking these bits down or sieving it first.

Peat Free and where possible, organic

Try to use only peat free composts and where possible also organic. Peat-free organic composts are totally natural and eco-friendly and can ensure an even growth and highly nutritious leaves. It is usually made from recycled garden materials (professionally composted garden and park plant material), bark fines, coir, wood fibre and food waste.

Lowland peat bogs and their wildlife are threatened through peat extraction for garden composts and other uses. Peatland wildlife such as dragonflies, butterflies and birds depend on peat for survival and gardeners are constantly being encouraged to choose alternatives. By 2010, some 90 per cent of composts and soil conditioners should be peat-free, if government targets are met.

What to buy

Which? Gardening tested widely available peat-free composts last year, assessing the performance of different brands of composts. Researchers found that the best buy was New Horizon Organic & Peat Free Growbag (available from william-sinclair.co.uk, 01522 537 561), which did well in each stage, although the trial showed that seed sowing is still a problem area for all peat-free composts. They also recommended New Horizon Multi-Purpose Potting Compost and Westland Earth Matters Peat Free Potting Compost.

To give you the best chance of good results, buy the freshest peat-free compost and avoid bags with damaged or faded packaging.

Where to buy organic and peat free composts, some options:

EcoPark Compost: <http://www.londonwaste.co.uk/news.php?id=131>

The compost is made at the EcoPark composting centre in Edmonton, North London. It is produced using kitchen and garden waste collected from homes in north London, including Islington. The raw materials are shredded, composted and matured under carefully controlled conditions. Although it is peat free it is not completely organic, as it contains non-organic kitchen waste. They sell two grade of compost; ask for the 0-10ml product which is suitable using in containers.

Individual 30 litre bags, costing £3 each, can be bought and collected from the Household Reuse and Recycling Centre, Hornsey Street, Islington, London, N7 8TP. LondonWaste can deliver to your home 0-10ml in bulk loads, either:

- 20 x 30 ltr bags (0.5 Tonnes) for £110 + VAT
- Loose load 2 Tonnes for £100 + VAT

To discuss your requirements or to get a quote, please contact them directly on 020 8884 5664.

John's Garden Centre:

Lordship Road, Stoke Newington, Islington, London, N16 0UL. Tel: 0207 275 9494

Alexandra Palace Garden Centre:

http://www.capitalgardens.co.uk/v3/garden_centre_alexandra_palace.php

Stock Vital Earth organic peat-free compost.

- Multi-purpose 50 ltr, £5.99.
- No 2 25 ltr potting compost, £4.99.
- No 3 high quality 10 ltr £3.48.

Address: Alexandra Palace, London, N22 4BB. Telephone: 020 8444 2555

Opening Hours: Mon-Sat: 9.00am-6.00pm, Sun & Bank Hols: 10.30am-4.30pm

They deliver to Islington area, costs about £8 for purchases under £50 and £14 above for any product and quantity.

Wyevale Garden Centre: <http://www.wyevale.co.uk>

Nearest Store: DA WS LANE, MILL HILL, NORTH LONDON, NW7 4SL

You can order over the phone: T: 0208 906 4255

They deliver on Mondays and Tuesdays only. Delivery charge is around £10. Grow bags are usually £3.99 each, though they do an occasional sale for £10 for 3 bags.

Homebase: <http://www.homebase.co.uk>

Variety of peat free and organic options.

Nearest store: Arena Shopping Park, Green Lanes Haringey, London, N4 1DT

In store purchase only. Home delivery possible, ask for cost.

Tel: 08456 407801

B&Q: <http://www.diy.com>

Variety of peat free and organic options

Nearest stores:

Unit 7 Tottenham Hale Retail Park, Broad Lane Tottenham London N15 4QD, Tel: 020 8365 1699

18 Heybridge Way, Lea Bridge Road Leyton London E10 7PQ, Tel: 020 8558 4817

Harrod Horticultural: www.harrodhorticultural.com

33ltr New Horizons organic & peat free grow bags (see special offers page)

You can order online for home delivery from, which costs £4.95 per 33L bag, and £4.95 delivery charge for a maximum of 5 bags.

Tel: 0845 402 5300

Creative Garden Ideas: <http://www.creativegardenideas.co.uk/>

Organic Peat Free composts:

○ [Miracle Gro Organic All Purpose 50ltr](#)

○ [Pro-Grow General Purpose 50 ltr](#)

Each £6 per bag, look out for special offers at 3 bags for £15. Free home delivery. Tel: 0845 671 1122

Making your own compost

Making your own compost from garden and kitchen waste is a great way to save money and help the environment. You can make compost from many different materials, and these can be composted in many different ways. If you have very little outdoor space you may wish to try making leaf mould in plastic bags – which is letting damp leaves decompose over 1-2 years. You may also be interested in having a wormery which will provide you with high quality compost and an organic liquid feed.

There is a great deal of information available from Islington Council, and heavily subsidised compost bins and wormeries. There is also much information online:

○ Islington Council:

http://www.islington.gov.uk/Environment/RubbishAndRecycling/reduce_reuse/garden/composting/default.asp

○ Comprehensive guide from Garden Organic:

<http://www.gardenorganic.org.uk/composting/index.php>

○ Recycle Now:

<http://www.recyclenow.com/compost/>

Filling the Container

1. Check the drainage holes. Are there enough? Are they unclogged?
2. If you have a deep container (20cm+), fill first with a layer of gravel for extra drainage.
3. Fill half the container with the compost.
4. Sprinkle a level tea spoon (5g) of Water Crystals over the compost. Mix this into the compost to provide an even distribution.
5. Add more compost, leaving a gap of at least 3 cm between the surface of the compost and the rim of the container.
6. Make sure that the compost is crumbly and light, taking care to break up any lumps as you pour the compost into your container.
7. Create a fine 'tilth' as a top layer. Tilth basically refers to the loose, fine top layer of soil - essential for allowing seeds to germinate and break through. Break up any clogs of compost with your hands and remove any large pieces of matter. Alternatively, sieve the compost you add to ensure there are no larger bits of bark or twig.
8. Gently pat down the compost, firming it but not compacting too much.
9. Water the compost so it is moist all the way through.
10. Water Crystals are small odourless water-absorbing polymers (Polyacrylamide) that help to regulate the amount of water to the plants as well as decreasing the need to water. They come under different brand names and are called different things, but are all based on Polyacrylamide crystals. The following information is a summary of what the manufacturers and retailers state.

When hydrated, each water crystal turns into a gel absorbing absorbs 400-500 times its weight in water. Crystals in your soil ensure an even distribution of moisture, capturing and storing water that would normally just drain through the potting soil. Water Crystals are not liquid but rather reservoirs of moisture in gel form, the only way the plant can get any moisture out of these reservoirs is to draw it out. The plant now regulates itself, drawing out water only when it's thirsty.

This continuous, ready supply of moisture helps prevent the roots from excessive, unnecessary growth that could result in the plant becoming root bound. This slow and steady release of water also helps prevent over saturation of the soil avoiding root rot. Expansion and contraction of the crystals during the watering cycle helps the soil to stay aerated and loose, keeping your plants happy and healthy.

Every time you water your plants the crystals will reabsorb water and store it for later use when the soil is dry.

Polyacrylamide Crystals are 100% Non-Toxic, odourless, and biodegradable. They are capable of continuing the process thousands of times and can last up to five years and will breakdown over time into water, nitrogen and carbon dioxide, all substances which are used by the plant.

There are a number of different water crystal gel products available at good garden centres, DIY stores and online - put the following in the search query box for best search engine results: Water saving crystals, Polymer crystals, Polyacrylamide crystals.

Sowing

When sowing seeds you have the choice to sow thin or thick (i.e. a few seeds or many seeds).

- If you sow thinly you will have a few salad plants that will have room to grow larger and will crop for longer.
- If you sow thickly you will have lots of baby salad leaves which will provide a regular harvest which needs regular cutting, however they will crop for a shorter period and so you will need to re-sow more often to have a continuity of salad. If you sow too thickly you can always thin the plants out later by pulling them out of the soil.

As salad seed is mostly small, it is best sown very shallow, half a centimetre deep or even less in the case of lettuce which needs light to germinate. Deeper sowing usually takes longer to emerge and may not come up at all.

- Create drills (very shallow trenches, ~0.5 - 1.0 cm). Put some seeds in the palm of your hand, use the other hand to take a 'pinch' and drop single seeds evenly every couple of centimetres. Alternatively, sprinkle them on the surface of your damp compost as evenly as possible, aiming for 1-2cm between seeds.
- Gently press the seeds into the damp soil to ensure good soil to seed contact and then cover the seeds with a very light layer of moist compost (about 5mm), breaking it up with your fingers if it is lumpy.

You'll need to keep track of what you planted, and plastic or wooden plant markers or tags are the best option for this purpose. Write the name and variety of the plant and the date when it was sown.

Germination

When you first plant your seeds, they will need a period of high humidity and even moisture to ensure germination. The best way to guarantee that the soil stays moist is to cover your trough or pot with clear plastic (bag or tray), creating a miniature greenhouse. Keep the plastic away from the soil so it doesn't impede germination. Salad seed should germinate in about a week. Keep the soil constantly moist, until at least two leaves are visible. Herbs usually start slowly, so be patient.

Thinning

Once they have germinated, and the plant has developed two leaves and the stalk is about 1cm tall, thin seedlings to the spacing you desire.

- 1cm or less for micro leaves (or do not thin at all).
- 1-3 cm for baby leaves.
- 3-10cm for medium-good sized leaves.

Thin when the soil is moist or water an hour or so beforehand. In hot weather, thin in the cool of the evening. Preferably thin by nipping off the seedlings at ground level. This is much less disruptive to neighbouring seedlings than pulling them out. Gently firm the soil around the base of the remaining seedlings.

Early growth from seed is tender and often slow. Because of this it is often more reliable to raise plants in a protected environment before setting them out.

Watering

Salads need careful watering and the compost should be kept evenly moist (not wet).

Do not depend on rainfall for watering containers, the large leaves often cover the soil medium surface, blocking most of the rainfall from getting to the plant.

Too much water will deprive the plants of oxygen, may result in spindly plants, and can turn the leaves yellow. Too little water may cause wilting, leaf burn or even death.

Moisture levels in container compost can be difficult to gauge and in wet weather they can look damp enough yet be dry underneath. Gently touch the surface of the soil daily, if it feels dry (Dry soil is crumbly, moist soil is spongy), add some water until it feels moist and a little water comes out through the drainage holes. Remember, plants growing in containers dry out faster than in the ground and on a hot, sunny day, a container may require water once or twice daily.

A good watering can is vital and a good rose is essential, because it is important to distribute water evenly and gently, with good control so that over- and under- watering are avoided.

Using a saucer under small pots or drip tray under troughs will give you an idea if water has flowed to the bottom, but watch out that saucers do not cause water-logging in extremely wet weather and removed them in winter.

It is best to water at the start of a bright day when the sunlight will soon evaporate water from the surface of small leaves to avoid scorching. Watering in the evening can lead to fungal problems.

A lot of moisture is lost through evaporation from the sides and soil surface. To off set this

- Line containers with heavy-duty polythene with drainage holes punched in the bottom.
- Mulch the surface with bark or gravel chippings, stones or any other suitable material.
- Stand pots in dishes or trays of gravel, and water through the gravel.

Harvesting

If you have sown your seed in their right season they should pass quite quickly from being tender youngsters to a stage of early maturity when the first leaves can be harvested. Salads are almost the only vegetable to make the transition so speedily – there is relatively little waiting involved, unless you want large leaves on your plate.

Loose leaf lettuces should be ready for harvesting after about 3-6 weeks after sowing, when they are about 10-15cm tall. The plant needs to have grown to the point where there are sufficient roots to rapidly enlarge existing small leaves and to make new ones. New growth is always happening from tiny leaves at the centre of the plant, so these should be left unharmed.

There are different methods of gathering salad greens:

- Pick individual leaves as required, making sure that you start with the larger leaves from the outside to keep the plants small and encourage further young, tender leaves in the centre.
- Alternatively, if you have planted thickly, you can cut across all the leaves to give a harvest of small, tender leaves. Start cutting everything about 2-5cm from the ground before or as soon as you see some yellowing of leaves at the bottom. This should give you plenty of small leaves, and another two or three cuts, providing the knife or scissors always pass just above the top of the plants' tiniest leaves.
- For lettuces, such as 'cos', wait until it is the size of a side plate with about ten leaves altogether, of which up to four can be removed at one pick.

The best quality and most viable leaves are those in between the baby ones at the centre and the large, mature, sometimes yellowing, diseased and slug-eaten ones at the edge. Keep picking the adolescent leaves, at intervals of two or three days to a fortnight from summer to winter, so that plants just keep on growing. With some salads, in many cases the mid-summer hot weather is liable to cause premature bolting, i.e. they stop producing leaves and start producing a flower.

Continual Harvests

Picking leaves off the same plant can continue for weeks and months, until central stems begin to elongate and rise upwards, indicating that plants are finally ready to flower and set seed. By sowing plants in their right season and by regularly picking, this flowering can be postponed sufficiently to give you the most worthwhile harvest of leaves.

Plan to sow little and often, the equivalent of half a seed packet every few weeks. This will ensure that you always have plants at every stage of growth, and that some are ready to take over when your first sowings are finally exhausted. Once your seedlings are about 5cm tall, sow the next lot or, wait two weeks and sow then, this should give a fairly continual supply. In winter although growth is slower and harvest are smaller, the flavours are more intense.

Fresh compost should provide enough nutrients to grow leaves for a few months. Nutrient levels can be topped up between crops with this avoids having to refill containers with new compost. There are many options available, always choose organic methods. Organic liquid feeds are available in good garden centres. You can easily make your own from a wormery or a liquid green manure from decomposed plant materials.

http://organicgardens.suite101.com/article.cfm/making_liquid_manure)

Pests & Natural Controls

Growing organically and in the right season should ensure that pests are mostly absent. Occasionally aphids will appear in the spring, before ladybirds arrive to eat them, and they can simply be washed off after picking the leaves.

Slugs need careful surveillance in container salad growing. Never underestimate the extent of this problem! One large slug can eat plenty of salad leaves while you are asleep, which is why I recommend pots rather than grow-bags – their moist plastic affords a perfect resting-place to slugs and snails. A plant's first tiny leaves are vulnerable to grazing by slugs and, since they are so small, it often takes just one nibble for the whole plant to disappear.

Here are some golden rules:

- Place containers as far as you can from walls and clumps of thick vegetation, and in as full sunlight as possible.
- Take a wander at dawn and dusk before planting to squash or remove any molluscs.
- Have a little rummage under nearby leaves and stones to remove what is lurking.
- Water in the morning so surface moisture has evaporated by nightfall.

Here are some controls, worth trying but not guaranteed to be totally successful:

- Copper strips around containers keep most slugs at bay, as long as you ensure there are no leaves overhanging the sides; apparently the copper gives a small electric shock to slimy pests.



£10 for 4m roll: [Harrod Horticultural](#)

- Organic slug gel and pellets, salt, soot, wood ash etc. may limit the damage, but are not foolproof and their overuse may poison the growing medium.
- Slug nematodes will offer protection but only for about six weeks and they are expensive.
- New eco-friendly board: recycled boards that are impregnated with salt and sulphate that the pot sits in gives protection for 3 weeks.



£4 each: [Harrod Horticultural](#)

Guide for Best (but not only) Sowing Dates

JAN (Indoors)	FEB (Indoors)	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP (all before mid-month)
Indoors		Indoors, from mid month outdoors						Rocket
Indoors		Indoors, from mid month outdoors						Lettuce after mid-month for over- wintering only
Indoors		Indoors, from mid month outdoors						Spinach until mid-month
		from mid month						Chards until mid-month
Indoors		from mid month						Parsley early in month
		Peas, for shoots						
	Indoors	from mid month						Orache
		from mid month						Coriander
		from mid month						Dill
		from mid month						Sorrel early in month
								Endvines
				certain types	certain types (leaf and heart)	any		any until about 20th

