

Saving Money on Winter Vegetables!

Lettuce Provides a Big Bang for Your Buck

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Go into your local grocery store and you will find bags and clamshells filled with all kinds of baby lettuce greens, hearts of romaine and whole heads of butterhead and leaf lettuces. All provide important vitamins and minerals for our winter meals, but they can be expensive, costing anywhere from \$2 to \$8 per pound. Their price reflects their delicacy (they can be challenging to pick and handle without damaging them), packaging and transportation (they must be packaged to avoid crushing and kept cool), and their perishability (they don't last long once picked). If you are concerned with cost-effectiveness, consider growing lettuce as a prime vegetable crop during the cool season here in Florida.

If you would like to grow your own lettuce this winter, try starting them from seed to save the most money. For \$2 to \$5 you can purchase a packet of several hundred seeds. Stick to varieties that are known to do well here in Florida and that are heat tolerant and disease resistant. Lettuce seeds are very small; you can purchase pelleted seeds to make handling them easier.



Romaine lettuce growing at the Urban Demonstration Garden

Lettuce seeds can be sown directly where you plan to grow them, if temperatures are cool and the soil temperature is below 75°F. They also transplant easily, so if outdoor temperatures haven't cooled down they can be started indoors in containers, peat pellets or in hydroponic media. Regardless of method or location, they should be sown very shallowly because lettuce seeds need light to germinate.

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(Pg. 2)

Move seedlings to the garden 3 to 4 weeks later or continue growing them inside if you have a south-facing window or light set up. Plant them in pots, raised beds or as a border in front of perennials or shrubs. Lettuce leaves are generally mature in 2 to 3 months, but baby leaves can be harvested at any time after the plant is well-established. Leaf lettuces are especially economical because you can harvest just a few of the lower leaves from each plant every day or so. This way you have enough for your daily salad, and the plants keep producing over a longer period. If you grow several varieties, you can create your own gourmet baby leaf salad blend for only pennies per serving.

Additional reading for growing lettuce at home

“Florida Vegetable Gardening Guide”

<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdf/files/VH/VH02100.pdf>

Vegetable Gardening in Florida Series

<http://gardeningsolutions.ifas.ufl.edu/plants/edibles/vegetables/vegetable-gardening-in-florida.html>. For details on how to grow lettuce in a simple 5-gallon bucket hydroponic system, see this blog post with video from UF/IFAS Extension Agent Hannah Wooten on “Set It and Forget It Hydroponics”

<https://blogs.ifas.ufl.edu/orangeco/2020/04/09/set-it-and-forget-it-hydroponics/>