

Butter Lettuce



Also called Boston and Bibb lettuce, good-quality butter lettuce will have fairly large, loose heads with thick leaves and even green coloring. Scratch the stalk and smell. A sweet or bitter smell means sweet or bitter flavor.

In 2009, Yuma County produced over 900 acres of Butter lettuce valued at over \$950,000.

Butter lettuce originated from the Mediterranean basin. Other varieties were developed as hybrids from the original genetic line.

The two best-known varieties of Butter Lettuce in the US are Bibb and Boston lettuce. How do you tell them apart? Boston's leaves are wider and lighter green than Bibb's. The smaller Bibb is highly prized by gourmets, and it is the flavorful rose and red tinged varieties that 'steal the show' with taste and beauty.

Bibb owes its name to John Bibb who developed this variety in Kentucky from Boston lettuce in the 1850s.

Butter lettuce, as its name suggests, is so tender that it melts in the mouth like butter, particularly the heart, when the lettuce is picked. It forms a loose head of large leaves resembling an open rose. The name "Boston," though typically North American, may be found anywhere. The flavor of butter lettuce is very subtle: it lends itself to countless uses.

Butter lettuce contains lactucarium which has effects similar to those of opium. Because of its sedative properties, it is recommended for treating insomnia, intestinal spasms and palpitations. It is said that the emperor Domitian "tortured" his guests at banquets by serving them a head of lettuce at the beginning of the meal. Not allowed to nod off in front of his imperial majesty, they were forced to fight off their sleepiness for hours.

Butter lettuce is composed of 96% water and is rich in calcium, magnesium, potassium, sodium, vitamins A, B, C and K and, contains 1.3% protein.

Butter lettuce is very fragile and its leaves wilt quickly. Experts suggest that Butter lettuce should be stored in a perforated bag in the vegetable crisper of the refrigerator. Select nice unwilted green leaves with no signs of damage or yellowing.

Its wide leaves can be used to wrap whipped goat cheese, or fresh cheese such as ricotta or cottage cheese seasoned with herbs.

Butter lettuce is a loose-heading lettuce with large soft leaves and a fairly mild but persistent, slightly sweet, slightly astringent flavor that makes it a perfect salad base for highlights ranging from fruit, citrus, to fish or nuts. Butter lettuce's soft leaves wilt readily, so you want to wait until immediately before serving to dress them.

Butter lettuce's uses extend well beyond salads. The large soft outer leaves - sometimes comprising most of the head - can be used as the wrappers in 'lettuce wraps' - tortillaless tacos or whatever. Though there's probably a tendency to put cottage cheese or egg salad into such things, there's no reason to stop there. Some recipes call for stuffing Butter lettuce with bean salad, salsa, couscous, various cheeses, lettuce leaves.

Butter lettuce is also nice in regular sandwiches. You can put quite a bit of Butter lettuce into a sandwich, so that the lettuce becomes an important part of the filling, but one which doesn't overshadow whatever 'main' filling you use, even if it's fairly subtle flavored. As with salads, though, you should consider the lettuce's delicacy, and serve the sandwiches immediately after preparation.

Cooking with lettuce seems often to be overlooked. The large, soft leaves of Butter lettuce are very useful in soups, torn and added just before serving, either stirred into the pot or placed in the individual bowls with the soup added on top. The shredded leaves can also be added to stir fry just at the end of cooking.

Butter lettuce is available in two varieties, the classic green and the newer red variety. The differences go beyond color. The leaf texture and tightness of the head of the two varieties seem to respond differently to changing growing conditions, so if you don't see just what you want in green, look at the red, and vice versa.

Butter lettuces have small, round, loosely formed heads with soft, butter-textured leaves ranging from a multitude and degree of red and rose colors along with greens and yellow tinges. The flavor is sweet and succulent. Because the leaves are quite tender, Butter lettuce requires gentle washing and handling.

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