RED LEAF LETTUCE

Leaf lettuce, including red leaf lettuce, is a major leafy green in Yuma County. In 2007, there was over 10,000 acres of leaf lettuce grown in the region with a value of over $1 million.

Native to the Mediterranean and the Mideast, lettuces are plants of great history. We know that they were cultivated in the royal gardens of the Persian kings as long ago as 2,500 years. Lettuce got its name from its milky sap—and, by association, was supposed to benefit lactating mothers who needed rich milk to feed their babies. Then, according to George Lang, in his Compendium of Culinary Nonsense and Trivia, "the ancient Greeks served lettuce soup at the end of a meal because it was supposed to be sleep-inducing.

Of the 4 distinct types of lettuce, the most popular in the U.S. is the iceberg or crisp-head variety. However, remember that the greener the leaves, the higher the vitamin A and C content. Cos or Romaine is a tall, narrow type, with almost furled leaves. Butter-head lettuce is a delicate lettuce which is currently used in “lettuce wrap” recipes. The 4th type is leaf lettuce, with slightly scalloped, curly leaves.

By far the most popular use of red lettuce is in salads, and a tip to remember is that for successful salads, the lettuce must be dry. If the salad is tossed while still wet, the dressing cannot adhere to the leaves, and the result is a soggy, wet mess, with all the dressing at the bottom of the bowl, a sight familiar to some of us.

In Europe, lettuce is popular in cookery, being braised with green peas, or made into a delicious summer soup.

Red leaf lettuce is a member of the Asteraceae (daisy). There are hundreds of lettuce varieties grown throughout the world and, because they peak at different times of year, there's always an ample supply of this universal salad favorite. All lettuce is low calorie and most of it is rich in calcium, iron and vitamins A and C. Keep in mind that the darker green leaves contain the most nutrients.

Lettuce has been described as a "weedy Cinderella" by T. W. Whitaker (1974) and, most likely, evolved from a weedy relative that was used in ancient Egypt as a source of cooking oil from its pressed seeds.

Oilseed lettuce is a primitive, wild-looking plant that forms no head or rosette of leaves. It bolts early in its growth cycle, forming a thin stem with elongated, narrow leaves. The seeds produced on this stem are about 50 percent larger than those formed on cultivated lettuce. The seeds are pressed to express an oil used in cooking. This is an ancient custom still practiced in twenty-first century Egypt.

One can speculate that somewhere in time ancient Egyptians selected, perhaps from oilseed lettuce, plants that bolted more slowly and formed a thick stem that was less bitter than the more primitive type and therefore edible. This new stem lettuce also had somewhat broader
leaves. Later, perhaps many centuries later, further selection may have yielded a newer form with a still shorter stem and broader leaves that were appealing enough to eat, the romaine and leaf types.

The scientific name of lettuce is *Lactuca sativa*. Lactuca means 'milk forming', sativa means 'common'. It is related to over one hundred wild species of lettuce and also to sunflower, artichoke, aster, and chrysanthemum.

As a green vegetable, lettuce contains many of the same nutrients found in other green vegetables, although mostly in lesser amounts. These include vitamins, minerals, water, and fiber but essentially no protein or fat.

The stems and leaves of lettuce and its wild relatives contain a milky liquid called latex. The latex contains two substances called lactones, which are the active ingredients in preparations used in some western European countries as a sedative and as a sleep inducer. In folk medicine additional uses for lettuce extracts include treatment for coughs, nervousness, tension, pain, rheumatism, and even insanity. The efficacy of these treatments is not well documented, but some of these effects have been shown in mice and toads.

Another minor nonfood use is drying lettuce leaves for the production of cigarettes without tobacco. Actually leaves of a wild relative of lettuce produce a more tobacco-like appearance. These have been manufactured for use in several brands of cigarettes.

Rarely lettuce may impact human biology in a harmful way. Green leafy vegetables are normally the standard for healthful food, providing vitamins and minerals in a fresh, tasty, and light context.

Red leaf lettuce is eaten fresh and raw and is typically eaten almost immediately after it’s cut. Lettuce is never frozen or canned.

Lettuce is always kept cool. After being cut in the field it is transported to a cooler, where the temperature is quickly reduced to just one degree above freezing. It is transported in refrigerated trucks to a market, where it is kept in a cooler before being placed in a refrigerated bin. Finally, it is purchased by the consumer, taken home, and placed in the refrigerator. This sequence is called the cold chain and is designed to maintain the quality of the lettuce at the time of harvest in the field as long as possible.

Red lettuce does contain chlorophyll, though it may be hidden in the red parts of the leaf. Green means vitamins. Many also associate greenness with the health of the planet and with personal health.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s changes in consumption patterns began. In Britain and Scandinavia iceberg lettuce increased in popularity until it became the dominant type. Iceberg lettuce also made inroads into the butterhead and romaine domains in other western European countries. In the United States, where the iceberg type reigned supreme for most of the twentieth century, romaine, butterhead, and leaf lettuces regained popularity and comprised about one-third of the total production at the end of the twentieth century.
The largest lettuce head was one that weighed 25 pounds, of the Salad Bowl cultivar, grown by Colin Bowcock of Willaston, England, in 1974.

The red pigment in red leaf lettuce contains small amounts of antioxidants. Eating red leaf lettuce is a delicious way to get lots of vitamins A and K, plus the antioxidants beta-carotene and lutein. Dark leaf lettuce provides more phytonutrients than iceberg lettuce.

The construction of a home-cooked meal has become a casualty of the modern fast-paced lifestyle. People either eat out more frequently or rely on food packages that are partially processed and therefore can be prepared quickly. Salads are included in this drive for efficiency and speed. Modern supermarkets have dedicated extensive shelf space to packaged salads containing what appears to be an infinite number of combinations of leaves (lettuce, cabbage, radicchio, spinach), cut vegetables (carrots, broccoli, cauliflower), dressings, bacon bits, shredded cheeses, croutons, cut fruits, and more.

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