BABY LEAF LETTUCE: TANGO

This beautiful lettuce variety is grown in the Yuma area primarily for the baby leaf salad industry as its curly and frilly leaf edges make a favorite contrast in bagged salads and specialty markets.

Tango resembles endive in appearance and is rich in vitamins, has a tangy flavor, but without the bitter taste. The frilly leaves of Tango give salads a gourmet look and won’t assault most palates with the sharp bite that often accompanies fancy, gourmet salads.

The bright green color makes a gorgeous salad, especially when paired with a red leaf lettuce, and the crisp texture holds up well to a variety of salad dressings.

When baby leaf salad varieties are ready for harvesting, highly specialized mechanical harvesting machines cut up to three tons of baby leaves an hour. The leaves are then transferred to highly sophisticated processing plants where the leaves are chilled, blended with other lettuces and packed into ‘washed and ready to eat’ bags or plastic containers.

Nutritionists agree that a varied diet is one of the best routes to good health. Leafy salads are a delicious way to boost the nutrition of a diet, and being so adaptable and wide ranging are suitable for main meals, side dishes, perfect for entertaining and great for everyday family meals.

While many originated in Asia, baby leaf greens have become very popular as salad mixtures, dressing and garnishing in gourmet cuisines. These fast growing lettuces can be harvested in as many as 30 days from planting.

Prior to the E. coli outbreak in 2006, bagged salads were the second-fastest selling items in U.S. grocery stores after bottled water. And, bagged salads took the market by storm. Going back 15 years, the entire lettuce market was virtually all head lettuce varieties like Iceberg and Romaine.

Although bagged salads have been available to the commercial food industry for decades, it took the development of a new packaging technology to bring the concept to consumers. What revolutionized bagged salads at the grocery store level was the introduction of a breathable plastic bag that preserves freshness.

During the last 5 years, more fast food outlets like Wendy's and McDonald's have been
jumping into the salad sector. Their battle to win more calorie-conscious customers is generating additional revenue for bagged salad companies.

Tango is somewhat chewy, not crisp nor buttery nor tender and is distinguished from other leafy greens from its wonderful fun shape and beautiful shade of green. It is one of the mildest-flavored lettuces, giving a fair amount of the 'green leafy' flavor which distinguishes the lettuces from other gourmet greens.

When allowed to grow to a full size head, the texture of Tango makes it good for sandwiches, since it contrasts with bread and many fillings in a way a softer lettuce won't. Moreover, Tango will retain crispness for some time, which is useful if sandwiches have to wait between preparation and consumption. Finally, appearance, flavor and texture all suit it for use as a presentation green, either edging a platter of whatever, mostly for decoration, or set out ready to be used for dipping or 'stuffing', with anything from egg salad to guacamole.

Kurt Nolte is an area agriculture agent with the Yuma County Cooperative Extension. He can be reached at 928-726-3904.