

## Wild Rocket



Wild Rocket, also known as Arugula is grown in the Yuma area is grown primarily as an addition to the spring mix salad industry. Spring Mix is made up of several carefully selected baby lettuces and greens, including Wild Rocket. The leaves are cut, washed and packaged as whole leaves - just like you would do in your own garden. Young and tender, they have that fresh flavor you get only from baby produce.

During the spring and summer, some may see Wild Rocket in full bloom as it is also grown in Yuma as a valuable seed crop, one of the few leafy greens grown for its seed found in the area.

A dark green, serrated leaf with a rich, intense peppery flavor, Wild Rocket is delicious in salads or as a pizza topping. The herbaceous plant found in the wild in Italy and is quite short, thin, serrated leaves which are bright-green in color and have an intense aroma. The interesting flavor of arugula adds spunk to any salad.

Arugula is an annual herb of the Cabbage family, grown for its tender hot-tasting leaves and/or edible white flowers. It has been cultivated since Roman times, and is native to the Mediterranean and Eastern Asia regions, where it was not only used as a food, but also as a diuretic and digestive aid. It was introduced into North America by Italian settlers, but its spicy leaves were particularly popular in Elizabethan England. Today, arugula is cultivated in the Mediterranean, the Middle East, northern and central India, and Brazil. Only since the 1980s has this plant resurfaced as a "trendy" culinary item, especially in the US, Britain, France, and Italy.

Wild Rocket is great with mild varieties of salad greens or cooked quickly in olive oil. The younger leaves are very popular in salads as they have the mildest flavor, however they can also be lightly boiled or steamed and added to numerous other dishes. The flowers of Wild Rocket are also edible and added to salads.

Young Wild Rocket leaves are said to be a good tonic and are used in cough medicine and are also described them being used as a good digestive aid. Small leaves tend to have a sweet, but nutty, mild taste; while the older ones can be very spicy, slightly bitter and peppery.

The two main varieties are wild and cultivated, but one must be aware that the "wild" can also be cultivated; the "true" wild plants still grow in France and Italy.

Although Wild Rocket is typically sold as part of a salad mix, it is also seen in some stores with its roots attached and displayed along with fresh herbs or specialty salad greens. However, this green is not to be misted, as is the custom in many supermarkets, as moisture causes deterioration.

Wild Rocket is related to both the radish and watercress and resembles both in appearance and taste, having a more intense flavor than most greens. The leaves are flat, dark green, and serrated, looking like long, slender oak leaves. Young leaves tend to be about three inches long, but mature ones can be up to eight inches in length. The leaves, and the edible flowers, can be very sandy and should be carefully washed. Treat it as any salad green by combining it with other greens, nuts and other vegetables. Wild Rocket is a good source of calcium, folate and vitamins A, C, and E.

Wild Rocket's dark green, notched leaves are prized as salad ingredients because of their pungent odor/flavor. However, the leaves, flowers and sprouted seeds are also added to salads. The flowers and leaves taste differently; some people prefer one to the other.

One of three species of the genus *Eruca*, Wild Rocket is typically grown as an annual and is often called rocket, period, as if it was the only plant with that name. Other names for it include Roquette (French), Rucola (Italian), Rauke (German), Arugula (Italian), Garden Rocket and Salad Rocket.

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