

Salad Mixes for the Home Garden

However you assess it—dollars earned, visual and taste delights, and especially as a nutritional bonanza—salad mixes (Mesclun in France and Misticanza in Italy) offer huge dividends from small spaces.

The concept is simple: a mixture of diverse greens and edible flowers grown quickly with the aid of temperate weather, and ample water and nitrogen. This concoction yields the essence of succulence when combined in various proportions for creative improvisational salads. (Note: For the home gardener, the use of edible flowers to enhance the sight and taste of a mix is a pleasurable bonus. As flowers in a mix tend to deteriorate rapidly and are laborious to pick and process, they are rarely seen in commercial mixes.)

While it appears to be a relatively new phenomenon of the last 10-20 years and has often been associated with fast-paced, upscale lifestyles, salad mixes have in reality been a staple of the masses for millennia the world around. An oft-overlooked aspect of salad mix is its high nutritional profile. More conventional salads tend to be exclusively or primarily lettuce based. While tasty, lettuce has a low nutritional rating.

Conversely, salad mixes, now popularly known as “microgreens,” offer ingredients from a wide array of plant families –

- ▶ Amaranthaceae (Amaranth family)
- ▶ Apeaceae/Umbelliferae (Carrot/parsley family)
- ▶ Asteraceae/Compositae (Sunflower family)
- ▶ Brassicaceae/Cruciferae (Cabbage family)
- ▶ Chenopodiaceae (Goosefoot family)
- ▶ Polygonaceae (Buckwheat family)
- ▶ Valerianaceae (Valerian family) ... and others.

As constituents in a mix, members of these far-flung families offer both a stronger nutritional foundation and a better blend of tastes and textures than purely lettuce-based salads.

Beyond nutrition, the appeal of a salad mix is in its blend of ingredients for visual effect, variability and depth of tastes and textures. The aim is to stimulate the full range of your taste buds. There are four major taste groupings:

1. **Tangy, spicy or piquant** ▶ Many herbs such as basil, sweet marjoram (especially the flower heads), oregano the hot mustards, pak and bok choi, cresses, sorrel (with its high oxalic acid content), mature arugula, shungiku, orach, amaranths...
2. **Bitter** ▶ Radicchio, endive, dandelion, chicory.
3. **“Sweet”** ▶ Lettuces, fennels, chervil, anise, hyssop, la vatera flowers, tarragon
4. **Mild** – Mizuna, spinach, beet greens, kale, chard, mache, tatsoi, mei quin, tah tsai, misome

Texture can be divided roughly into two categories –

Smooth ▶ Lettuce (leaf and butter), mache, spinach, young arugula, chard, kale, beet greens

Crunchy ▶ Mei quin (stems or petioles), pak choi, endives, raddichio, chicory

When all factors are combined, the result is a veritable symphony for the palate!



EXAMPLES OF SALAD MIX INGREDIENTS

- ▶ Kale, mizuna (sweet mustard), osaka, purple and red giant mustard, tatsoi, mei, quin choi, pak choi, broad and curly cress, arugula, hon tsai, tai
- ▶ Spinach, beet leaves, chard, orach, lambsquarter
- ▶ Various leaf amaranths
- ▶ Lettuces, endive, radicchio, dandelion, chicory
- ▶ Dill, cilantro, chervil, fennel, finocchio, parsley, cutting or leaf celery
- ▶ Mache or corn salad
- ▶ Sorrel

FOR THE GARDENER

I have always puzzled at most pre-mixed mesclun collections offered by seed companies. A typical mesclun mix often contains –

- Lettuces — 30-40 days to mature
- Arugula — 20-30 days to mature
- Radicchio and endive — 90 days to mature
- Chervil and mache — 70-90 days to mature
- Cresses and mustard — 20 days to mature

Basically the quick-germinating, tall-, and fast-growing species will dominate the early harvest period and then go to seed, and thus outcompete the slow- and low-growing ingredients. The true, intended full flavor of the mix will never be realized because of the extreme disparity in growth and maturation rates. Notable exceptions are several of the salad mixes from Renee's Garden (www.reneesgarden.com or many garden centers), including the Italian Misticanza and the Paris Market Mix.

So ... buy the constituents individually (this may also prove to be more economical) and create a sensible mix yourself. Or even better, sow separate species (a block of low-growing species and a block of rapid-growing species) in separate rows or blocks. The separate-species approach affords gardeners the luxury of being creative in an impromptu fashion at harvest time.

– Orin Martin

TIPS ON USING SALAD MIXES

Salads aren't just lettuce anymore! They can be created from a myriad of ingredients unified and enhanced by an array of dressings. Increasingly, prewashed mixes are available that take much of the labor of preparation out of salad making, but they spoil fairly quickly and cost more per pound. Mesclun, the mixture of baby lettuces and greens sold at markets, typically contains seasonal greens that range from mild to spicy to bitter. Much labor can be saved by investing in an inexpensive salad spinner, the bigger the better!

Usually, salads should be tossed with dressing just before serving, or dressing can be offered on the side. If heavy ingredients are included, add them last and don't toss but scoop from the bottom of the salad bowl to serve. If the salad is to be marinated, allow at least 1 to 2 hours for the marinade to do its work.

Salad ingredients and dressings should complement and contrast. Mix sharp with sweet, spicy with mild, crunchy with creamy. Combine strong flavors with other strong flavors (spinach with onions, tomatoes, and feta or kale with red cabbage, scallions, capers, and chopped egg).

Select dressings that balance the salad (light, sharp oil and vinegar dressing with a rich salad or a sweet, creamy dressing with a simple cabbage slaw).

PREPARING SALAD GREENS

To clean salad greens, remove outer damaged leaves, cut off core, and plunge into a sink full of clean, cold water. Separate the leaves and gently swish and swirl around to remove dirt and grit. Let sit a few minutes to allow the dirt to settle to the bottom of the sink, then remove leaves one at a time, tear into bite sized pieces, and loosely pack into salad spinner until full. Crank the handle about 25 times to dry thoroughly before dumping into your salad bowl. Spinning works great on washed, chopped vegetables like green onions, radishes, and carrots, too—just don't add too many at a time as they weigh more.

Salad greens and other vegetables can be cleaned and dried ahead of time and stored in the refrigerator in plastic bags or containers with produce loosely wrapped in paper towels to absorb excess moisture. They keep up to several days that way.

Orin Martin is manager of the 3-acre Chadwick Garden at the Center for Agroecology & Sustainable Food Systems at the UC Santa Cruz. Since 1977, he has taught classes, lectures, and workshops to thousands of home gardeners, apprentices, students, and budding farmers.



This material was produced by the Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems (CASFS) at the University of California, Santa Cruz. For more information and additional publications, see casfs.ucsc.edu.