

SCOOP ON LETTUCE VARIETIES

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My husband Brendan and I farm 4 acres of mixed vegetables in Apalachin, New York. We market our produce primarily through our local farmers' market and a 75 member CSA project. I sell sporadically at restaurants, usually when I have surplus of an item. As our farm and marketing style has evolved, we have become locally famous for our consistent supply and many varieties of lettuce.

Lettuce is great because we can fit a lot in a relatively small space. We grow it in beds that are 4' x 200' and each fit 800 heads in a 12" x 12" spacing. We have also started doing direct seeded pelleted seed for mixes of a core group of varieties that form the basis of my salad mixes. Lettuce is also very short season, allowing for many sowings over the course of a season. Although we grow some of almost everything, we have come to realize that while there is a lot of competition at market with tomatoes and zucchini, there is very little for lettuce. There are several reasons that we have identified. First, is the very high labor requirement all season, second is the very perishable nature of the product. However, the lack of interesting, quality lettuce created an opportunity for us. We sell full size heads at the stand and to the CSA in addition to salad mixes that I prepare the day before each market.

Over the years I have trialed and evaluated many varieties. What am I looking for when choosing a lettuce for our farm? There are many factors that interlock but sometimes conflict. First is flavor, after all, they are meant to be eaten! The next criterion is appearance. Finally, I consider ease of growing, seasonality and disease resistance. Some lettuces I grow strictly for salad mixes and not necessarily are the same that will create a good presence as a full head on the stand. I round out the roster with a few that have interesting stories behind them that I can tell people and then add a few more just for the brag factor of growing so many different varieties.

I have found that each customer has his or her favorite and I strive to have a variety for each person. I have general rules of thumb- Have representatives of both red and green leaf, a butterhead and a romaine. It appeals to the senses with a visual mix of form, color and texture. That is what marketing is about after all, making it look so nice that they want to buy one even if they have a head at home in the refrigerator. You also want to find the balance of getting out enough product that it provides the bountiful appearance, but not so many that you can't sell that amount quickly and replenish with fresh lettuce from the coolers.

TopTen 2007- Vulcan, Black Seeded Simpson, Prizehead, Tropicana, Cherokee, Galisse, Vivian, Buttercrunch, Pirat, Ermosa

Lettuce Varieties

Leaf-Green

Anuenue- summer crisp. Good flavor in heat, my only gripe is pretty small size

***Black-Seeded Simpson**- One of our absolute favorites for early season production. In early season with adequate fertility and moisture, heads are 16" diameter. Customer favorite. Bolts quickly in heat.

Concept- Very nice lettuce. Good performer, heavy heads with attractive puckered leaf. Easy to grow.

De Morges Braun - a green with a pretty pink overlay. OK. Good flavor, not a strong customer favorite, but I like it. 2007- best in cool weather, really don't grow too much anymore due to weak sales.

Green Ice- I love it for a very early (first 3-4 sowings) lettuce. Very convoluted leaf packed tightly forming a tight head with blanched interior. Good early season. Bolts rapidly in heat. Can be very tough in centers in hot weather variety.

Loma- spiky, I didn't like it.

Monet- I hate it . Same reason as Tango.

Nevada- summer crisp. Nice thick succulent leaves. Uniform, good in heat. Attractive shape, easy to sell. Pairs with Sierra (or Magenta at JS).

Reine des Glaces- Spiky, tough, don't like

***Simpson Elite** - Meant to be a warmer weather replacement for B.S.S.(Black Seeded Simpson). Not as good. Similar in color, but a tougher leaf. Still high on my list for mid-season because customers gravitate toward the color.

***Slobolt** - Not a standout but OK.(2004-I take that back. Performs consistently well and really is slow to bolt. Good BSS color.) 2007- Still high on my list except 2006 germination problems.

Summertime Iceberg- I grew it one year for the customers who say they only liked iceberg. I then realized my strength was in offering people all the alternatives to icebergs.

Tango- JS call it a "must have ingredient for mix"??? Only if you want miniature Christmas trees in your garden. Bolts immediately. I hate it.

St. Vincent- OK

Tomahawk- Very good flavor, disease susceptible.

*****Tropicana** -2007- replaces Two Star as my favorite green leaf. Probably the number one customer favorite green leaf. Extremely popular due to excellent color, appearance and ability to hold after harvest,. Common statement- "I still have one in my refrigerator from last week and it still looks like it did the day I bought it!" Still more tender than Two Star so therefore still appeals to serious salad folks.

***Two Star-** One of my top picks. Good dark green color. Good flavor all season. Customer favorite. Personally not my favorite because leaf is fairly tough, but customers say they like it because it holds a week or more precisely because of this "toughness".

Waldmann's Dk. Green- Good but I like Two Star better. Very similar though and I like both. 2007- Don't really grow anymore . Tropicana is so superior and more refined there is not much point.

Webb's Wonderful. Good but at 72 days too slow compared to the rest of my lettuces.

Leaf Red

Cardinale- Good

Cherokee- Fantastic lettuce, fantastic color – see notes on Magenta

Cracoviensis- Very unique, read the description and think you must grow it. Don't! It always says good flavor "even when bolted". That is because it always bolts and I am not going to ever sell bolted lettuce at our stand, no matter what!

Galactic- Same as Merlot. I like it for my mixes by either name. Not for mature head

production. Small, intense red and frilly, we plant it in row 6" apart. A "black" red color - very intense.

Hyper Red Rurple Waved. I like saying the name. Good. 2007- Has only improved since introduction. Used to have a fair amount of variability. Now consistently good. Excellent deep color. Great for mixes.

Ibis-Wonderful appearance, color and flavor. Shiny and succulent. An iceberg and as such can have somewhat tough leaves but is attractive especially at an immature stage. Not much difference (if any) to **Pablo or Red Iceberg.** I find them all so similar

Impuls- Lolla Rossa type. Not much difference

Dk Red Lolla Rossa and Lolla Rossa - Similar. Small, intensely red, frilly mounds. Plant 6" in row spacing. I grow for loft and texture in salad mixes. Not meant for head production.

Les Orilles du Diable – “Ears of the Devil” Great name. People will buy it just for the name! A very unique burgundy, strappy, pointy tipped lettuce. Performs consistently well. Nothing else shaped like it. I always grow it.

Magenta- Improved Sierra. Excellent performer and taste. Only complaint is the name, there is nothing “magenta” about it. Color is lackluster, maybe I had too high hopes because of the name. A very similar one with amazing color is Cherokee. If you were only going to grow one, I would pick Cherokee every time.

Michelle 2007- 0% germination. Total crop failure New Red Fire- Very nice color, I grow it for my mixes. Somewhat smaller head and prone to toughness (compared to Vulcan). OK blended with other lettuces

* **Prizehead-** One of my favorites for early season. Very pretty light green with blush tips. Grows large and heavy in spring, not so big in summer although flavor remains good. 2007- In hot weather size is smaller and lighter color gradient from pale green to pale red. Still I grow all season and flavor remains good, although I rate it as excellent in the first half of season.

Really Red Deer Tongue. Poorly named. Nor at all like the other Deer Tongues. I can't see a relation. Must have Cracoviensis in its parentage. Has the same quality of tough, waxy leaves. When you wash it, the water beads up silvery and doesn't really wet the leaf- very much reminds me of kale. I can't think of anything nice to say except “unique”.

Red Fox- Good one.

* **Red Sails-** high on our list of favorites. I like it for its texture and flavor- never tough or bitter. Good for all season production. In spring it gets huge-16" diameter. Only drawback I see is for market growers. Very brittle midribs which break easily during washing and packing for market-somewhat a pain to break leaves on way to market. Dusky red color. Very slow to bolt-holds extremely well.

Redina- Had good color but small, somewhat tough and prone to bitterness.

Rossimo- Beautiful clear cherry red. I grow for mixes especially. Leaf gets bitter in heat & tough. I still grow for the color.

Royal Red- Similar to Rossimo. Catalog says both good in heat, I think better for early and late season.

Sierra- a summer crisp. Color is subtle, more a blush, attractive, uniform, good in heat.

Teide 2007- One of my new favorites for the stand as well as mixes. Has excellent “loft” for mixes as well as color gradations and texture. Didn't size up well in late season but was still worth growing. I really like it and appealed to many customers.

*****Vulcan**- A great replacement for Red Sails. Holds well, good size, very good flavor, packs well. I like the color-a brighter red with green at base of leaves. A favorite with the customers and me. 2007- Consistently awesome. Many, many heads now grown and is my all time favorite number one all-season lettuce! Great color, great flavor and great disease tolerance! So far, it can't be beat for a super reliable lettuce that is an easy seller.

Oakleaf

Antares - Pretty light bronze/pink. However very lightweight and somewhat sparse. Good for mixes, although not a high yield of leaves.

Berenice – OK I like the narrow lobed look for the mixes. Very narrow leaf. Stays pretty small for market heads and I find customers pick Royal oakleaf consistently over this one, although from a grower's view it doesn't have the multiple disease issues I have with Royal.

Blushed Butter Oak- OK, unique mound, but bolts rapidly in hot weather. I like for mixes

Blushed Icy Oak Gene Pool - So-So. Good flavor but doesn't live up to wonderful catalog description.

****Bronze Arrowhead** - Similar to Brunia and Cocarde. Also very good. Large lobed, attractively colored leaves.

* **Brunia**- Another bronze oakleaf. Similar to Cocarde. Good flavor and texture.

***Cocarde**- More a bronze colored oakleaf but larger lobed like the green Royal oakleaf Royal Oakleaf. I always grow it and love it.

Feuille de Chene Blonde- A version of Salad Bowl with slightly larger leaves. Bolts too rapidly. Not going to grow again.

****Flashy** – Or also called Flashy Green Butter Oak- One of Frank Morton's absolute best. I love it! A certain percentage will be plain green, but still good and marketable. The dazzling appearance makes it a piece of artwork. It is one of the "speckled" lettuces, so there are always those few cranky conservative customers who may think it is diseased. Open your eyes and enjoy the beauty!!

****Galisse** – A must grow oakleaf for the first half of season when leaves form a beautiful lime green lobed mound. Leaves are buttery and tender, many people will wait in line until this one comes out of the coolers. Later season we had some issues where the leaves didn't form the nice mounded heads, instead were "spikier" and tougher, bolting when small even in the cooler fall weather. Seems very sensitive to shortening daylength.

Italienischer- Coarse. Not crazy about it.

Lingue di Canarino- Canary Tongue. I didn't like. Small, bolts quickly

Oscarde, OK. Small. Nice color

***Red Salad Bowl**- One of my standards, esp. for my mixes. Customer favorite. We grow all season, but needs to be harvested young in heat to avoid bitterness and bolting. In cool weather grows quite large. Color is most intense with cool weather, shorter daylength.

***Royal Oakleaf**- A must grow for me. A large, spiky oakleaf, looks like a lettuce with a bad hair day. Always sweet. We grow all season although will bolt if not harvested in a timely fashion. One of my main salad mix ingredients. Does have some issues with disease susceptibility.

Salad Bowl- I always grow it and always regret it. Good only for the coolest weather. Bolts rapidly. I do like the light lime green color for my mixes, but doesn't hold at all. Seed catalog description is "good resistance to bolting and good heat tolerance" I don't know what they are talking about! Not in my garden!2007- gave another chance because Mark Dunau took me to task. Says this is one of his best performers. It was great in spring but still deteriorated in hot weather for me!

Strela Green- Gets a glowing review in the catalog, but didn't live up to it. I found the "rough-textured" leaves to be tough and not at all sweet.

Sunfire- Only from JS as far as I know. I love it. Very unique shape leaf, very lobed, branched oakleaf. A wonderful salad mix ingredient. Prone to toughness. Use sparingly.

Romaines

Blushed Butter Cos- Very good taste, light color. Not that strong of a seller.

Brown Golding- tastes good but brown tips and veins makes it look diseased or old. Hard to sell to customers

***Brune d'Hiver-** I would call it more a deep burgundy overlay with green at the base only. Very beautiful, good taste and reliable performer

Coastal Star- Very good, standard romaine. Also grew pelleted for mixes, not so great, too slow.

Crisp Mint - Not minty, leaves have ruffled appearance of mint leaves. Heavy, unique leaves. I grow just for something different. 2007- Dropped from line up. Can be tough sell

***Forrellenschluss-**Known as Freckles or Trout Back. Apple green with wonderful maroon splashing and flecks. Can be hard to sell, I have to work to tell people it is supposed to look this way. I tell them it looks like art (Jackson Pollack) and that it was rated number one in a

Seed Savers Exchange taste test out of 900 varieties. People either love it or hate it and thinks it looks diseased.

Integrata Red- All right. Mixes

***Jericho-**2004. The romaine everyone is talking about. Big and heavy. All season, particularly summer.2007. Now everyone's standard . Somewhat light green color is not as appealing, I wish it was a bit darker green. Also I had a few sowings in 2007 where it seemed particularly virus susceptible, especially when compared to its neighbors.

Majestic Red- OK flavor, but floppy, not a great seller for a romaine. 2007- Actually was a great seller for a red romaine.

Medallion-Very good but available pelleted seed only. 2007- Can't find anymore. Too bad

Outredgeous - I grow it for mixes, nice dark red, sometimes full size heads for the color, but the flavor isn't anything to write home about.

Parris Island Cos- Handles heat but tough in my opinion. Not much flavor.

PIC714. so-so. Not memorable

Plato II- Quite good. Heavy when mature

Romance- my favorite green romaine, tender, nice upright shape, very uniform.(2003-performed horribly-no longer favorite-see Jericho)(Still a great name)

Rosalita- Not very distinctive

***Rouge d'hiver-** I love it. Popular at market and reliable growing. 2007- I barely grow anymore. Although it is attractive in the field with it's beautiful, unique color and appearance, it bolts relatively rapidly and it's open, flat appearance doesn't lend itself to romaine identification from the customers. Plus, in heat it can be very tough.

Ruben's Red- A keeper. I love the color, appearance and flavor.

Sweet Valentine- I like it.

Vivian- A surprise knockout! I usually just order from a few standard catalogs, but this Burpee seed caught my eye while standing in line at Home Depot! I was standing in line perusing the seed racks near the register and was attracted by the photo. It lived up to the picture. Super easy, disease free, and reliable. I was sad when I ran out of seed (I bought the only 4 packets)! Awesome lettuce, liked by all. I will make a concerted effort to seek out a source for seed in 2008.

***Winter Density-** actually a Bibb cross. Very Good. 2007- I still love it.

Bibbs and Butterheads

Adriana- Similar to Ermosa- I have a hard time telling them apart.

****Buttercrunch-** Customer favorite with its sweet succulent broad midrib. I have some problems with bottom rot but still grow it. I always pick one for the family's salad bowl. People will wait in line for this one!

***Carmona-**My husband's very favorite. Can't say enough good about size, appearance and flavor. Some bottom rot problems though.(2004-not available any more)

Chadwick's Rodan- Similar to Red Deer Tongue. Susceptible to disease. Deer Tongue- I always grow it, my husband always says don't. Was the original culprit in bringing anthracnose into the garden. Susceptible. I like the flavor for myself and mixes, but very small and we could be more productive growing something else in its space. 2007- Actually was a stellar performer this year, and at times performed better than Buttercrunch. It has many similar eating qualities. I told one of my Buttercrunch customers I had a similar lettuce that would "Knock her socks off" and many people heard and started requesting the "knock your socks off lettuce".

Red Deer Tongue- Similar as above but a reddish tint.

***Ermosa-** Nice uniform and good for all season. Love it. Decent disease resistance.2007- Grew it pelleted for mix production. Direct seeded. Performed beautifully.

***Esmeralda-** One of my favorites. Nice quality. Some problems with bottom rot but still worth growing.

Fireball-Great. Paler Red Cross which I like. Performs well in hot weather.

Grandpa's- Nothing noticeable

Jebousek- Beautiful, tasty, I like it. Similar to the Deer Tongues.

***Kagraner Sommer Bibb-** Elegant summer lettuce, nice size even in the heat.

Kinemontpas- Good but not outstanding. Large. Marvel of Four Seasons- small, disease susceptible. There are better. One of the old fashioned red butterheads. Same as Marveille des Quatre Saisons. Disease susceptible.

Mikola- Red, different looking, good taste. Somewhat angular looking head. 2007- Not around anymore

Nancy- Nice, large and fancy for spring. Love it. Optima- Good but there is better.

***Pirat**-Not very large, tastes good but stays small. Different savoyed leaves. I put in mixes but seems to be susceptible to several diseases, incl. Tipburn & bottom rot.(2004-improved) 2007- Even more improved. One of my favorites and standards. Love it. Also not as savoyed as early days. Now a more standard smooth, soft leaf

***Red Cross**- Love it. Makes a nice, beautifully colored head, especially in cool weather. Not great at heading up in hot weather, but still makes marketable lettuce for the stand. A bit long to make a full head (I don't believe 48 days), but still a great lettuce.

Red Star- So-so. I will probably grow again to give another chance.

***Red Riding Hood**- I used to love it, now I like it. There are better such as Carmona. Last year had terrible germination.(2004-has improved-back to loving it.) 2007- No longer around.

***Speckled Bibb**- Wonderful in all respects. Not that large, but it is the favorite of Becky's at the River Rose Café. I grow for full size and mixes. Absolutely gorgeous interior leaves. Probably the prettiest lettuce in my opinion. Always good tasting. When I say "full size", it still is a small lettuce. Does have some disease issues. Again a speckled lettuce, so some customer education may be in order. Know your market.

Sylvesta - Nancy replacement – good – performed well all season. Large, pale green heads. Supposedly more disease tolerance than Nancy, but I never noticed any problems with Nancy. Doesn't seem as tender as Nancy can be.

Tom Thumb- Recommended by my friend, Lynn, says it is one of her CSA's favorite. Very small, gourmet quality, super tender thin, crisp, tightly packed leaves. Not my CSA favorite because of size, and not my favorite because of disease susceptibility. I do love it when it grows well in cool weather. Probably could plant closer spacing than our standard 12"x12"

Trocadero- Very good.

Winter Marvel - Bolts quickly in heat but very good in cool weather.

Yugoslavian Red- I hate it. Bolts when it is about three inches across. Useless.