



SALAD LEAVES AND ORIENTAL MIXES FOR CUT-AND-COME-AGAIN SALADS & STIR FRIES

Packs of gourmet salad leaves in the supermarket are extremely expensive and have a very short shelf life once opened. They usually go soggy within a day or two. For the same price (around £2) you can buy a pack of seeds from which you will get nine to ten times the quantity almost effortlessly – with three sowings and, on average, three cuts with each sowing. Other advantages are that you can pick only as much as you need, avoiding waste and with the guarantee of a really fresh product.

Seed merchants have caught onto the idea, so now you can buy many different combinations of leaves in varying degrees of spiciness as well as in contrasting textures, shapes and colours. When the 'Bamboo Curtain' came down, a wide range of oriental greens were introduced to the West. They are a diverse and very useful group for cut-and-come-again (CCA) salads and stir-fries. They are naturally strong growing and healthy and many will sail through the worst of winter given a little cover. They include the crisp white stemmed pak choi, loose-headed Chinese cabbage, choy sum and the flowering broccoli with its delicious flowering shoots; mizuna with its ferny leaves and many types of mustard including the komatsuna spinach mustards; also Texcel greens, Chinese chives, green-in-the snow, alfalfa, amaranthus, chrysanthemum greens and mouli and leaf radish. All grow at speed through summer and autumn – the ideal is a cool summer and a mild autumn. But given cover, they will keep going through winter until spring.

The technique

You can grow them in the ground but using a container has the advantages of keeping them clean. It gives you the opportunity to protect them from slugs and snails. Generally they dislike the 'hotter' types but love to graze off the milder leaves. A simple way to keep them off is to smother the outside of the container with Vaseline (which acts like the slippery pole) and put Vicks chest rub around the rim (to confuse their sense of smell).

Sow fairly densely in a container filled out with multi-purpose compost, or row them out on your plot. For CCA salad leaves you don't need to thin them out but when they are 2 – 3ins (5 – 7.5cms) high, begin to harvest a few leaves while making room for the others to grow on. After that you should get two or three cuts from the remaining plants over the next few weeks.

When cutting them always leave the first set of two leaves (the cotyledons) so that the plants can re-grow. If you sow a few seeds every two weeks, you should have a supply all summer. In autumn, germinate the seed in the greenhouse or at home on a windowsill and grow them on under a cloche or in a cold frame. They will grow more slowly but it is still worth it.

***RECOMMENDED FOR WINTER:**

Tamar Organics (www.tamarorganics.co.uk, 01579 371087) do an oriental mix which they say contains varieties not usually available to the public. It only needs to be under cover in the coldest months.

Text © Caroline Foley 2007