

Mesclun

Judy Bernard



Peterborough and Area Master Gardeners
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The term “mesclun” originated in Provence, France, where the harvesting or gathering of early spring field greens had been a rite of spring for many centuries. The traditional mesclun consisted of four greens: chervil, arugula, lettuce and endive in precise proportions. These greens were wild rather than cultivated as they are today. In today’s mixtures of mesclun one can find a wide variety of different lettuce greens as well as young green leaves of other families of vegetables. Some of the mixes may be mild while others can have a hotter, peppery bite to them. One thing they have in common is the wide range of colours and textures.

Little can compare to the pleasure of eating salad greens picked fresh from the garden and few crops respond as well as a mesclun mix to the small home garden. The leaves are harvested when they are 10 - 15cm long, cutting just above the growing crown. Harvested this way and lightly fertilized, they will continue to produce another crop in a week or so. Morning is the best time to harvest mesclun using sharp scissors or a sharp knife. Wash the leaves in water and leave to dry on a towel as spinning will bruise the tender leaves. Tender young dandelion leaves will add a little extra interest to your salad mixture.

Nutritionally, mesclun is high in Vitamin A and potassium as well as containing Vitamin C and other minerals. The different colours not only add interest to the salad mixture, they are caused by variations in important anti-oxidants.

Mesclun is one of the easiest crops to grow for the home gardener, and in to-day’s economic environment it is also very inexpensive. Since lettuce is more than 90 percent water, it does not store well. It is not wise to plant more than you can consume when it is ready.

Seed mixtures come prepackaged so that the different greens will germinate and grow at the same rate. If one desires greens that aren’t in the mixture, or ones that have a

different rate of growth, they would need to be planted separately. Sow the seeds directly outdoors and do not cover too deeply. It is then critical that they get even and consistent moisture. Frequent watering after planting is important so the young seedlings do not dry out.

You may want to start your greens earlier in the spring using a cold frame or cloche to protect them from freezing and to warm them earlier. Just make sure that you keep them evenly moist and that ventilate so that they do not overheat.

As it is shallow rooted, mesclun can be grown on balconies in shallow containers (e.g. one metre long piece of eavetrough material with the end pieces). The most important considerations are having a rich potting soil and keeping the soil moist. Pots with mesclun can be quite decorative and they can easily be replanted with flowers after the greens are done for the summer or you could plant them together and let the flowers overtake the pot later in the season.

Weeds are not generally a problem with this type of crop as the seeds are planted close together and since they sprout and grow quickly they leave little room for weeds to grow.

Mesclun is susceptible to the same diseases that lettuce is prone to such as damping off, botrytis and downy mildew. Air circulation and choosing resistant varieties are your best bet for this. It is a good idea to move the lettuce around in the garden from year to year perhaps alternating with root crops, but do not plant directly after broccoli since lettuce is sensitive to chemicals left in the soil.

You may get aphids, leafhoppers, or cabbage loopers. If you do, you might be able to prevent these problems using a floating row cover. Try using a double layer over your seedlings and it might bring the mesclun on a bit earlier. One method is to wrap the row cover around a 2x4 which will help it from blowing around in the wind. You can then use the wood to wind it up for storage later. With container planting, most of the insect problems can be prevented.

At least two or three harvests can be taken with attention to moisture and fertilizing. Succession plantings every couple of weeks and putting planters in the shade during the heat of the day can also extend the growing season. A new growing season can also begin in late August or early September and will provide you with fresh salad for a few more weeks.

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