Curiously, salad got its start not as a dietary staple, but as an aphrodisiac!

We know this because leafy relations to modern romaine are depicted in ancient paintings as sustaining Min, the Egyptian god of fertility. Fast-forward a few thousand years and the fertility connection was still paramount in paintings by Leonardo da Vinci, including the Leda, which depicts a child holding a bouquet of lamb’s lettuce (today’s mâché) next to the goddess of fertility.

By this point in the 1500s, raw, leafy vegetables covered in oily, salted dressing were well established in the Roman diet as “herba salta”, literally, “salted herbs,” or the not-so-distant cousins of tasty greens that define the healthful salads, appetizers and mains we enjoy today.
Basic types

The Asteraceae family is the source of some of the best-known salad greens:
- Lettuce is a mild-flavored leafy annual that is available in many types, textures, colors and shapes.
- Chicories like endive and radicchio are perennial herbaceous plants that punctuate savory dishes with a bitter flavor profile.
- Dandelion greens, the mortal foe of spring lawns, are surprisingly diverse culinary additions, offering unique flavor and health benefits.

The Amaranthaceae family includes another popular green:
- Spinach is a leafy annual that’s native to central and western Asia. In the US and around the world it’s harvested at many stages, from babyleaf to full size leaves.

Bring on the Brassicaceae family for superior flavor and cold hardiness:
- Arugula, also called “rocket”, is a spicy-flavored leafy annual with a strong following among greens lovers.
- Kale is a nutrient-rich green, leafy, cruciferous vegetable.
- Mustard Greens offer a zesty and colorful dimension to salad mixes.

For added flavor and visual appeal, think beyond the aisle of standard greens:
- Asian Greens offer a wide array of shoots, leaves and choys that bring a unique look, flavor and dimension to salads.
- Chard, better known as Swiss Chard and recognized for health benefits, is a green leafy vegetable with large leaf stalks typically prepared separately from stems.
- Herbs, from basil to cilantro to watercress to dill and more, fresh herbs can always take your salads and often entire meals to the next level.
- “Tops” are the tender greens of beet and turnip.

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GARDENING TIPS

Salad greens are all unique in terms of how they grow best, so it’s well worth following the specific planting instructions as written on the package for each variety to ensure a bountiful and continuous home harvest throughout your growing season.

Most greens prefer cool weather (50 to 75°F), so consider if that’s winter, spring or fall in your area, so you can be ready to plant. Plant all greens in full sun. Soil that’s evenly moist but not too wet yields the best greens. As a general guide, spinach, kale and mustard greens can be sown six weeks before the last frost, followed by lettuce and chard three weeks later. You can choose to transplant seedlings or sow seeds directly into the garden. Transplants can be started earlier to get a jump on the season.

Leafy greens grow well in the garden and are also ideal for containers. To prepare outdoor soil, consider mixing in 1 cup of organic fertilizer for every 10' row, and ensure the soil is evenly moist. For containers, choose one that is large enough that it won’t easily dry out. Fill with quality potting mix and consider mixing in peat and coir. Soil should be kept moist, not soggy. Planting depth varies by variety, so be sure to read seed package instructions. Note that some seeds, like lettuce, need light to germinate, so take care not to plant too deep.

After germination, thin seedlings to desired spacing. If your goal is babyleaf, keep the spacing fairly dense. If you’d like to harvest whole heads, ensure spacing of 4”-8” apart within row.