

Veritable Vegetable's Produce Notes SALAD MIX--A Good Alternative!

Summertime brings fresh ingredients into the kitchen, including melons, tomatoes, squash and corn. One set of vegetables that is a mainstay in the kitchen throughout the year are lettuces and greens, which accompany the summer crops quite nicely.

Americans consume about thirty pounds of lettuce a year, which is five times what they were at the beginning of the century. Iceberg lettuce was once the lettuce of choice in many households, but other lettuces such as Romaine and Loose-leaf varieties are moving to the forefront of popularity. These varieties have a better amount of vitamin C, beta carotene, iron, calcium, folacin, and dietary fiber than Iceberg.

Over the past decade, salad mix has gained popularity in the marketplace, and is offered at farmers' markets, and in most grocery stores, both in prepackaged and loose quantities. Every salad mix grower follows a standard recipe, yet every farmer adds certain ingredients to give their mix a special uniqueness, both in flavor and presentation.

Salad mix crops are grown in close succession to each other, most are harvested within 3-6 weeks, when they are still baby-size. The range of mixes has expanded from the "standard" salad mix blend of 4-6 lettuces plus some greens to mixes which focus on just one element or the other. For example, there are mixes which just contain red and green lettuces; some which just contain greens like Mizuna, Red Kale, Mustards, and Tat Soi; and the popular Braising Mix which includes Red Kale, Green and Red Mustards, Raabs, and Dandelions.

When more greens are consumed in salads, the nutritional content is enhanced as well as the variety of taste and texture. Salad mixes can offer the most nutrition which is noted by the deep color found in the mixes. Both the lettuces and the greens found in the mixes have lots of carotene, some vitamin C, and are low in fat sodium and calories.

Both on their own or in a mix, **Romaine and Loose-leaf Lettuces** have up to six times as much vitamin C and 5-10 times as much beta carotene as iceberg lettuce. Both romaine and loose-leaf lettuce contain 68mg of calcium per 2 cups. Red and green leaf and red oak are the most popular of the leaf lettuces, and all are mainstays in salad mix recipes.

A spicy addition to any salad or pasta dish, **Arugula** is also called Rocket or Roquette, probably due to its peppery taste. It is a member of the cruciferous family, so it may help to protect against cancer. Arugula has about four times the vitamin C and three times the beta carotene of Romaine. It is high in calcium, checking in at a whopping 309 mg per 2 cups. When grown in warmer climates, the flavor becomes sharper during the summer.

One of the more obscure greens, **Curly Endive or Escarole** is sometimes found in salad mixes, offering a slightly bitter taste. Curly Endive is high in calcium, 100 mg/2cups; Escarole has 52mg/2cups.

One of the more bitter greens, which has very little green, **Radicchio** is used by some growers as a colorful accent to their mixes, the deep red and white leaves can liven any mix. It is much more time consuming to grow so some growers have elected to omit it from their standard recipe.

So, which is better? Both salad mix and lettuce offer easy, fresh accompaniments to any meal, and either can liven up a sandwich, complement a bowl of soup, or be a meal in themselves. The key is to remember that the darker the leaf, the more nutritious the meal will be.

~P. Echevarria