

Saving Lettuce Seed

The lettuce family (called *Asteraceae* or sometimes *Compositae*) is comprised of over 23,000 species of plants. Salad lettuce is self-pollinating and fairly easy to grow, so it requires fairly small isolation distances and is ideal for beginning seed savers or those with small gardens.

GROWING

Lettuce is self-pollinating, so you can grow different cultivars close together (minimum three metres for non-commercial seed-saving). Wild lettuce crosses with cultivated lettuce, so cut down this weed if it is nearby. Since lettuce seeds ripen up to six weeks after the plant would normally be harvested, you must allow an extra six weeks in the garden before frost. (You might have to start the seeds indoors as seedlings if your season is short.) Grow at least 10 plants, and allow at least 6 to develop to the flowering stage to preserve the genetic diversity of the cultivar. Make sure you are growing open pollinated, not hybrid, seed!

Bolting to seed

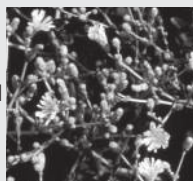
1 Lettuce keeps growing for a long time after it's ready to eat, because it needs to grow a flower stalk before it can produce seeds. The first sign of a stalk is a swelling in the middle of the head. This is called "bolting", and it happens faster when the soil is hot and dry. Some lettuce varieties have a tight head that will need a bit of help to allow the stalk to emerge. When head lettuce has grown to its full size, make a cross-shaped incision on the top of the head or pull apart the top leaves.



2 Within a few weeks, small flower buds appear on the stalk. This is your last chance to "rogue" out plants you don't want seed from. Continuously inspect your plants through the season, looking for any off-types, early-bolters, and poor quality leaves. Taste a leaf or two from each plant, and pull up all that don't meet your highest standards. Leave only the best to grow for seed.



3 Lettuce flowers look like tiny dandelions. That's because dandelions and lettuce are in the same plant family. A typical lettuce plant will bear dozens of flowers, some earlier and some later, which means they will ripen their seed at different times too.



4 A few days after each flower opens, it closes again and re-opens with a fluffy seed head. Just like dandelions, each seed is attached to a piece of white fuzz that will carry it away when the wind blows. It is now ready to harvest.



HARVESTING

Seeds are ready to harvest once they've formed clusters topped by white fluff similar to a dandelion flower. Seed heads don't ripen at the same time, and they will drop their seeds if not collected promptly. One approach is to pick individual seed heads every few days as they ripen, or shake/brush free seeds into a bag or bin every few days. Alternately, the whole flower stalk can be cut when half the seeds are ripe, and placed in a labelled paper bag to finish drying. You may not get as many ripe seeds with the latter method.

CLEANING

Of all common garden plants, lettuce seeds are probably the most difficult to clean. These steps should help you:

- Once you have collected the seed heads, allow them to dry fully in an open container or bag.
- Break the seed heads by rolling them between your fingers or rubbing them through a 1/8" screen. Hard seed heads will shatter and release their seeds.
- Separate the seeds from the chaff. Use an electric fan to create a uniform breeze and slowly pour the seeds into the airstream, catching them in a large bin or two placed below. Adjust your technique so that most of the seeds land in one bin, and most of the chaff lands in another. If the chaff bin still has lots of seeds in it, reclaim it and try again. Another way is to screen the seeds through two meshes: one bigger than the seeds, and one smaller.
- If you can't remove all the chaff, don't worry. For home use, it is perfectly alright to plant this mixture: the chaff just turns to compost and the seeds don't mind.

STORING

Label your seeds with the variety and date. Store seeds in a cool, dry, dark place. Glass jars work well. If you have more than one variety, put each in its own envelope and then place all the envelopes in a glass jar. If stored well, lettuce seed should remain viable for 2-5 years. 🌱🌱🌱

The complete guide on *How to Save Your Own Seeds*

Step-by-step instructions on how to grow, harvest, save and store seed from the vegetables in your garden. Plus clear illustrations, easy-to-read reference charts, separate instructions for beginners and experts, botany basics and pollinator profiles.

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