



Woodcut of lettuce from sixteenth-century herbal. (Colorized by Josef Beery.)

Lettuce

Monday Morning Madness

THOMAS JEFFERSON, horticultural authority, author of “A General Gardening Calendar,” and stern garden taskmaster, advised the readers of the *American Farmer*, “A thimbleful of Lettuce should be sowed every Monday morning, from Feb. 1st to Sept. 1.” Rivaling the favoritism he showed the garden pea, lettuce was by far the most avidly planted vegetable in the Monticello Kitchen Garden: there were over 125 sowings between 1809 and 1824—including twenty-five separate plantings in 1809 and twenty-four in 1811—in fourteen different sites, an unusual diversity of garden homeland compared to other crops. Jefferson loved lettuce and he wanted it all the time, whether the ground was frozen in January or the garden was burned up in July. His chart of the Washington farmer’s market documents the availability of lettuce every month of the year, Etienne LeMaire, his Presidential maitre d’, purchased lettuce over ninety times for Presidential meals in 1806, and, over the course of his career as a lettuce grower, Jefferson harvested lettuce every month of the year at Monticello.

Although Jefferson was not as strict to his Poplar Forest Overseer, Jeremiah Goodman, who, at least in 1812, was allowed to sow lettuce seed “every other Monday,” Jefferson himself actually tried to plant lettuce on Mondays: altogether, fifty percent of the lettuce sowings, fifty-one out of 102 between 1811 and 1824 took place on Monday. Experienced gardeners

plant according to the condition of the soil, whether wet or dry, and are attuned to incipient rainfall and frost, so it’s gratifying to realize Jefferson’s Monday morning routine was a stated goal rather than a dogged practice. In addition, Jefferson did sow lettuce at Monticello virtually every two weeks during the tough growing seasons of 1809, 1811, and 1812, but by 1814 he apparently learned that summer lettuce in Virginia is altogether too bitter and tough, so he moved the earliest sowing dates into February and avoided planting between mid-April and August to avoid the summer heat until he could safely sow lettuce in the fall for winter harvests.

Boiled lettuce, “much superior to spinach” according to Bernard McMahon, was popular in the age of Jefferson, writers recommended coarse and milky-sapped summer leaves or overgrown cabbage-type heads for boiling or soups, and, possibly, Jefferson’s insistence from 1809 to 1813 on sowing lettuces in May, June, or July was to “dress” his summer lettuce rather than to eat it “raw.” Whatever their final shape, lettuce’s ultimate destination was the salad bowl, sometimes mixed with a bouquet of greens such as spinach, orach, corn salad, endive, pepper grass, French sorrel, and sprouts. According to Mary Randolph, lettuce was gathered with other greens early in the morning, laid in cold water, sometimes including ice, and then only



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Spring with abundant moisture and cool air is lettuce planting time in the Monticello Vegetable Garden.

removed hours later at dinner. Randolph's salad dressing included oil, common and tarragon vinegar, hard-boiled egg yolks, mustard, sugar, and salt. Salads were garnished with sliced egg whites and scallions, "they being the most delicate of the onion tribe." The ancient Romans used a dressing of hot oil and vinegar (according to food historian William Woys Weaver), and Landon Carter adapted this by mixing his "salad" with melted butter and vinegar. Lettuce, according to food historian, Karen Hess, was considered "cool and moist," so it was commonly balanced with warm olive oil, spicy pepper, and vinegar, plus other hot or bitter greens like endive and mustard. Hess also concluded that green salads were eaten before the main meal in non-drinking cultures, after the meal when wine was served, perhaps providing a hint as to the schedule of the salad course at Monticello, where wine was "an indispensable" to the table.

Although lettuce was regularly first sown in February and March, Jefferson rarely recorded harvesting "loaves" or

"heads" until June or July. An exception was in 1814 when Dutch Brown was harvested on May 7. Most years Jefferson planted lettuce for fall and, if the season was mild, winter and early spring harvests; in 1823, a September 2 planting of Dutch Brown lettuce resulted in an "abundance for winter & spring." Fall lettuce was sometimes planted in warm pockets below the stone house and in submural beds, while the February sowings or earliest spring plantings often took place in northwest border beds or in 1820, the "high bed," which had perhaps dried earlier than other soils. In 1817 Jefferson noted that "the whole of our winter lettuce & endive killed, tho' well covered." Bernard McMahon recommended protecting winter lettuce "by sticking in small branches of pine or cedar between the rows, which will yield them considerable protection, especially if some long dry straw be laid over them in frosty or cutting weather."

The 1809, 1811, and 1812 garden Kalendars reveal a meticulous and de-

liberate lettuce seed planter at work: each date's sowing took place along an individual row numbered from west to east in the prime real estate of squares IX or XVII, and often the row was divided into halves, the "N" or north side and the "S" or south side, each end planted successively every week or with different varieties. Radish seed, and more rarely other companion species like endive, spinach, and corn salad, was sowed in the rows with the lettuce, a practice generally endorsed by garden writers. The quick-germinating radish breaks up the crusty soil surface, loosening the way for the later sprouting lettuces; as well, the radish is a culinary companion. Jefferson occasionally transplanted his choicest lettuces—Marseilles, Tennis-ball, Ice, White Loaf—from the Northwest Border or beds below the stone house into rows in the principal squares.

Although lettuce was most commonly set out in rows in the Monticello garden squares, Jefferson instructed his Poplar Forest overseer, Jeremiah Goodman, to prepare near the stable "a bed of 4. f. wide & 6. or 8. feet long" to provide the vacationing ex-President with lettuce "fit for use when I come."

Lettuce has an ancient lineage, traced to the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans as a salad dressed raw with oil and vinegar but also commonly parched, steamed, or boiled. This crown jewel of the salad tribe was universally acknowledged as the choicest of greens, and it radiated richly tapestried literary associations, from sleep inducement to impotence. John Gerard described the later developing cabbage lettuce, "formed into that glove or round head," so common "the simplest is not ignorant." John Parkinson mentioned the "great diversitie"

Rows of perfect lettuces still grow in Jefferson's Vegetable Garden.



TWP



RENÉE COMET PHOTOGRAPHY

Salads were already popular at the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century table. Here a fresh serving of tender greens ornamenting a period setting is pictured in the book *Dining at Monticello*. This beautifully illustrated book about Monticello's food culture contains 75 recipes from family manuscripts and can be ordered online at monticellostore.stores.yahoo.net.

of lettuces for all seasons, and suggested the superiority of Romaine types, the oldest of all lettuces: with “long leaves like a Teasel” that were “bound and whited” or blanched. A bread and butter English kitchen garden crop, it was introduced into North America with the first settlers. Mark Catesby was surprised that Native Americans banished salads from their diet, but Francis Michel, who visited Williamsburg in 1700 and 1701, noted how the colonists “pay little attention to garden plants except lettuce.” Lettuce was often overlooked by eighteenth-century narrators of the Virginia landscape, perhaps because it was taken for granted. William Byrd mentioned three varieties in 1737 and lettuce was ubiquitous, in many varieties, on mid-eighteenth-century Virginia seed lists.

At least in New England, Amelia Simmons suggested lettuce was so common that, “Your taste must guide your market” in selecting among the variety of types. Richard Parkinson wrote that in suburban Baltimore by 1800 “they boil everything that is green for use at the table,” however, cabbaging lettuce requires some effort and a garden location, in contrast to more casually cultivated spring greens. Other Virginia gentlemen, from Richard Henry Lee to George Washington to Colonel Francis Taylor included lettuce in their spring, and for Taylor, fall, planting rotations. The omnipresence of lettuce in the Washington markets also dispels any suggestion that lettuce was an overlooked staple in the age of Jefferson. William Cobbett, always successful at summarizing a plant's American role, said lettuce was “pleasanter to a majority of tastes than any other plant,” but he lamented that, “I never saw

Early Forcing Coss		Lactuca sativa.	
Lettuce	---		
White Coss Lettuce	---	a variety	
Green Coss Lettuce	---	ditto	
Aleppo or Spotted Coss	---	ditto	
Egyptian Coss Lettuce	---	ditto	
Cabbage Lettuce	---	ditto	
Brown Dutch Lettuce	---	ditto	
Imperial Lettuce	---	ditto	
Grand Admiral Lettuce	---	ditto	
Capuchin Lettuce	---	ditto	
Stella Lettuce	---	ditto	
Royal Cabbage Lettuce	---	ditto	
Honey Lettuce	---	ditto	
Hammerhead Half-Green Lettuce	---	ditto	
Large Royal Lettuce	---	ditto	
Mogul Lettuce	---	ditto	
Prince's Cabbage Lettuce	---	ditto	
Trinidad Lettuce	---	ditto	
Large Royal Lettuce	---	ditto	
New Zealand Cabbage Lettuce, a few and very superior kind	---	ditto	
Early Forcing Radish		Raphanus sativus.	
Early Short-top'd ditto	---	a variety	
London Radish	---	ditto	
Salmon Radish	---	ditto	
Black Spanish Radish	---	ditto	

Seedsman Bernard McMabon's list of lettuce from his turn-of-the-nineteenth-century seed list.

a really fine Lettuce in America” due to the extreme continental climate: the cold of winter and premature bolting in the heat of summer. Cobbett preferred the Romaine types, which, after one unfolds the outside leaves, presents “a lump of white enough for a salad for ten people, unless they be French, and, then you have a lettuce to every person.”

Lettuce varieties are conveniently, if imprecisely, divided into Cos (Roman or Romaine), with tall narrow heads,



'Spotted Aleppo' Lettuce

and cabbaging (heading, or “loafing” to Jefferson) varieties. Although more beans were likely grown at the time, and both pea and cabbage varieties were abundant, more lettuce varieties appeared in Virginian and American seed offerings before 1820 than any other type of vegetable. Seedsman Peter Crowwells sold seventeen varieties in Alexandria in 1793, Fredericksburg’s George French sold eleven in 1800, and Bernard McMahon sold nineteen from Philadelphia in 1803: Vilmorin-Andrieux described over ninety-five varieties in *The Vegetable Garden*, 1865.

Four lettuce varieties—Brown Dutch, Ice, Tennis-ball, and White Loaf—stand out in the retirement garden as Jefferson favorites.

Brown Dutch

“Dutch Brown” lettuce was planted thirty-one times between 1809 and 1824, often in warm, protected sites like the Northwest Border; the August and September-sowed plants could be harvested all winter and into the spring, as documented in 1823 when there was an “abundance.” Although universally regarded as a winter lettuce, Jefferson also planted Brown Dutch in the spring, and both Philip Miller and John Randolph were impressed by both its winter hardiness and ability to thrive in hot weather without bolting to seed. Commonly distributed by seed houses in Virginia and the United States, Brown Dutch is a lovely lettuce with its shiny, reddish-brown, marbled and floppy leaves that form a medium-sized, loosely folded head: a jeweled and luscious basket. Richard Henry Lee sowed Brown Dutch on January 7, 1790. In 1821, Dr. Phillip Barraud wrote to his son-in-law, Jefferson’s friend, John Hartwell Cocke: “You should try next Autumn to get your Spring lettuce set in November. I never fail in this climate. I have more than 1000 head of Dutch brown bigger than your

breakfast cup in Cabbaging order and as fine as possible.”

Ice

Ice lettuce was the third most commonly planted lettuce variety, sowed eighteen times, often with spinach or radishes. Obtained from Theophilus Holt in 1809, Jefferson initially sowed seeds that year between April and June, but in succeeding years it was planted in February, coming to the table on June 3 in 1819; it “loafed” on June 7 in 1821. After Jefferson’s brother, Randolph, requested seed of Ice lettuce in 1815, Jefferson sent “what I think better the white loaf lettuce. the ice lettuce does not do well in a dry season.” Although, heaven forbid to food purists, probably similar to today’s Iceberg lettuce, this is difficult to verify because, particularly when blanched, Romaine types were commonly cherished for their snow-white hearts.



Ice Lettuce

Tennis-ball

The small, pale-leaved and loosely-heading Tennis-ball, a predecessor to the Boston lettuces revered today, was planted thirteen times between 1809 and 1824. Jefferson wanted to reserve Tennis-ball for the garden at Poplar Forest because “it does not require so much attention as the kind I have here [at Monticello].” Tennis-

Monticello Lettuce Seed



‘Brown Dutch’ Lettuce
(*Lactuca sativa* cv.) Jefferson’s most frequently planted lettuce variety. Brown Dutch is a loose-headed variety with leaves that are tinged reddish-brown.

ITEM #600460, PACKET \$2.50



‘Paris White Cos’ Lettuce
(*Lactuca sativa* cv.) Jefferson first listed Cos Lettuce in 1794. Cos or Romaine lettuces produce long, erect heads that are largest at the top and taper towards the roots.

ITEM #631085, PACKET \$2.50



‘Spotted Aleppo’ Lettuce
(*Lactuca sativa* cv.) This eighteenth-century Romaine lettuce was sold by Philadelphia seedsman, Bernard McMahon, in 1804. The leaves are speckled with a bright reddish-brown variegation that is highly ornamental.

ITEM #600558, PACKET \$2.50



‘Tennis-ball’ Lettuce
(*Lactuca sativa* cv.) ‘Tennis-ball’ Lettuce was grown in America in the late eighteenth century, and it eventually became the parent of our Boston types still popular today. Very popular in the vegetable garden at Monticello.

ITEM #600095, PACKET \$2.50

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ball was described by Richard Bradley in 1738 as hardy and “small but very full cabbage,” and it was mentioned by Major Thomas Jones of Essex county Virginia in 1797, and sold by Bernard McMahon in 1803. Jefferson purchased Tennis-ball from seedsman Theophilus Holt in Washington, in 1809, and it was commonly offered by urban seed merchants in the early nineteenth century. Tennis-ball is less hardy to cold and more bothered by heat than other varieties, and it is best as an

the description was more consistently applied. Jefferson’s White Loaf was likely the same as the Common Cabbage lettuce universally discussed and grown in kitchen gardens; the type that John Randolph had trouble with because he tried to grow it in the summer time, but which Jefferson ultimately realized was best for February sowing and May harvesting.

Peter J. Hatch, Director
Monticello Gardens and Grounds

early spring lettuce. Unfortunately, Jefferson planted it too late for producing the most succulent harvest; its soft, tender, melting leaves form a delicious pale-green head, a delicate bowl, a tiny pillow of moist, vegetable bliss.

White Loaf, Loaf, White

Jefferson’s favorite and most commonly planted lettuce variety was the White Loaf, the same as the “loaf” or “white” lettuce planted forty-seven times between 1809 and 1824. These are seemingly generic terms, and it was unusual to associate a “loaf” with lettuce rather than with cabbage, where