

How to Grow Cress

Garden cress also called broadleaf cress--and other cresses: curly cress and watercress--are quick growing cool-weather vegetables. Sow cress in the garden early in spring, as early as 4 or 6 weeks before the last frost, or grow cress indoors year round. Cress is quick growing from seed; it will be ready for harvest 15 to 20 days after sowing. Sow successive crops until mid summer. Sow cress again in early autumn for autumn and winter harvest.

Description. There are a couple types of cress:

- **Garden cress** (*Lepidium sativum*), also called broadleaf cress, has flat, bright green leaves to 4 inches long and 2 inches wide. Garden cress, a biennial, is also called peppergrass, pepper cress, and mustard cress. Golden-leafed broadleaf cress is sometimes called Australian cress. Garden cress is an annual that thrives in damp soil.
- **Curly cress** (*Barbarea vernapraecox*), also called cresson, early winter cress, or Upland cress, has finely divided leaves resembling parsley or chervil atop thin, branching stems. Curly cress is dark green and is also called curled cress, curlicress, fine curled cress, moss curled cress, and extra-curled cress. Curly cress is a biennial that thrives in damp soil.

Cresses grow easily from seed and also can be propagated from stem-pieces or cuttings. Cress will sprout on water-soaked paper towels or cotton.

Site. Plant cress in shade or semi shade. Grow garden cress and curly cress in moist but well-drained sandy loam. Grow watercress in a container of compost-rich, sandy soil submerged in running water. Cress prefers a soil pH of 6.0 to 6.8.

Planting time. Cresses are cool-weather annuals. Sow cress in the garden early in spring, as early as 4 or 6 before the last frost, or grow cress indoors year round. Cress will germinate in about 14 days at 45°F. Garden cress is quick growing from seed; it will be ready for harvest 15 to 20 days after sowing. Curly cress requires 40 to 50 days to reach maturity but harvest can begin 15 days after sowing. Watercress requires 55 to 70 days to reach maturity but runner tips can be pinched off for use 15 to 20 days after sowing. Sow cress every 10 days for a continuous harvest through midsummer. Cress can become pungent and inedible in hot weather. Plant cress in late summer for an autumn and winter harvest. Sow garden cress and curly cress seed $\frac{1}{4}$ inch deep; sow seed thickly in wide rows; thin successful seedlings to 6 inches apart. Space rows 18 to 24 inches apart. Sow successive crops every 10 to 14 days. Grow watercress in submerged containers. Pinch back cress to keep it manageable.

Water and feeding. Cress requires even moisture. Do not let roots dry out. Grow watercress in gently running water. Grow cress in soil rich in aged compost. Keep soil weed free. Avoid growing cress in direct sun. Pinch cress back to promote new foliage.

Container growing. Garden cress and curly can be grown in containers, pots and boxes. Sow seeds thickly; cress is not bothered by overcrowding. Garden cress can be grown indoors on a windowsill. Use a container with good bottom drainage. Keep the soil moist.

Harvest. Cut or pinch out cress tips as needed, cut-and-come-again. Begin cutting plants when they reach 3 to 4 inches tall. Plants cut back to $\frac{1}{2}$ inch will quickly regrow. Cress is most tender at the early seed-leaf stage; harvest cress well before it matures. Sprouts can also be used fresh.

Storing and preserving. Cress will keep in the refrigerator up to one week. Seeds can be sprouted.