

How to Grow Iceberg Lettuce

No doubt about it. Iceberg lettuce is the king. Iceberg is a head lettuce, the one that's by far the most popular in stores. Iceberg lettuce has a tightly formed head of crisp, sweet leaves. Leaves on the outside are green, giving way to blanched pale yellow to whitish center leaves. The sweetest leaves are in the center. Growing to about a foot in diameter, iceberg lettuce is a staple in the kitchen for salads, on sandwiches, shredded in snacks, as a garnish, and an essential ingredient in countless recipes. Iceberg lettuce is a cool weather crop that requires a long growing season. In many areas, it begins to mature just as warm weather hits. The result can be splitting bolting, or rotting of heads. So, we recommend an indoor start in the spring.

Days to Maturity: This cool weather crop needs 80-90 days to reach maturity.

How to Grow Iceberg Lettuce: Iceberg lettuce seeds can be sowed directly into the garden, or started indoors. We recommend an indoor start, to allow time for the lettuce to mature, before hot weather sets in. Sow a few lettuce seeds in each cell of a seed tray. Cover very lightly with a fine starter soil. Keep soil in the seed tray moist. In about 7-10 days, the seedlings will sprout. Once you see seedlings, go ahead and thin seedlings to one plant per cell.

Tip: When beginning transplants, stagger the start of your seedlings to spread out the crop. For example, if you are going to plant 24 plants, sow six in the seed tray today, sow six more 3-4 days later, etc. Transplant into the garden after all danger of frost has past. Ideally, transplant them on a cool or cloudy day. Water well after transplanting. Space plants 12" apart in rows 18" apart. The soil should be rich and fertile, and well draining. Keep the soil moist. Frequent use of nitrogen rich fertilizer is recommended. The plants respond well to regular applications of liquid fertilizer.

Transplanting Tip: When transplanting any type of lettuce in hot weather, place some form of sun shade over the plant for a couple of days. Any makeshift shade will do. It's important to time the crop to mature prior to the onset of hot dry weather. In these conditions, the plant is bolt...go to seed. It can also split or rot. For a fall crop, an indoor start is best. Lettuce seeds do not germinate well in the hot soil of mid-summer.

Harvesting: If you have a big crop, begin to harvest iceberg lettuce after the head begins to form. The outer leaves are edible, but are not sweet like the blanched inner leaves. Make sure to harvest when the heads are big and tightly packed. Once they reach this stage, bolting is but a few days away.

Insects and Pests: Bunnies like lettuce. Got bunnies!? Then, a rabbit fence is in your future. Insects can become a real problem, too. A wide variety of insects like lettuce. Lettuce is delicate, and can absorb insecticides. If an infestation occurs, we recommend insecticidal soaps and organic repellents. If you choose chemical sprays, read the label carefully to make sure it is safe for lettuce. Also, heed the amount of time you have to wait to harvest the crop after spraying.....it's all on the label of the spray you purchase. Slugs are a real problem for all types of lettuces. There are a variety of control methods.

Diseases of Lettuce: Lettuce will wilt and rot in hot, humid weather. The plant will also bolt or go to seed stage in higher heat. Rotting can also occur in wet soils.

Hardiness: Iceberg lettuce thrives in cooler weather. But, it is also susceptible to frost. It does not like mid-summer heat, or dry conditions. Set your first crop outdoors after the last spring frost. Time your Fall crop to mature prior to the first fall frost date for your area.