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Northern Gardeners: It's Time to Sow Winter Greens

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The first autumn leaf may not yet have fallen, but never mind that. It's time to consider the first winter leaf on your plate. Winter fare may seem far in the future, but September is planting time.

Winter greens take many forms. In southern France they're big, blanched heads of endive and escarole. In our household the winter treat is a cold-weather baby leaf salad. Like the week-old mix in plastic bags, in the store? No: fresh, lively basketfuls with a sweet, springlike flavor, brought in from the cold and rinsed in the sink. There's no comparison.

Many greens might love your winter garden, but for ease and infallibility here are the Big Six.

Lettuce. Like most winter salad crops, lettuce is hardier when grown not as heads but in closely sown rows, cut at about three inches tall with a small serrated knife. Find the hardiest varieties among the oak leaf types, and romaines such as Rouge d'Hiver and Winter Density. Sown in a cold frame, they'll regrow for a second and third helping.

Spinach. Bursting with folate, calcium, iron and even some protein, spinach is the ultimate winter tonic. Sown in rows eight inches apart, plants spaced four inches apart in the row, it may need no protection at all. Pick the outer leaves first.

Arugula. Not the biting, bolting, flea-beetle-ridden arugula of summer, but the bright-green, mild arugula of short, crisp days.

Tatsoi. Most Asian greens thrive in winter, but tatsoi is my first choice. Sow it like spinach and pick at baby size, or space more widely and allow large, flat rosettes to grow. Either way it's mild and delicious, raw or cooked.

Mache. This European green forms tiny rosette-shaped heads. Cut them whole, with a serrated knife at soil level, then wash thoroughly and toss whole into salads. Soft and succulent, it's the queen of winter greens. When there is a gap in the garden, cold frame or greenhouse, sow mache.

Claytonia. Oddly enough, the least familiar one of all is an American native plant. Small, round leaves on slender stems are so light, they float when you wash them. Extremely hardy, they can be cut and recut until spring, when they bloom and go to seed. Allow this to happen and they will germinate the following fall for a volunteer crop.

To make this a Sweet 16, you might add to the list Swiss chard, frise endive, mizuna, bok choy, land cress, parsley, chervil, mustard greens, beet greens and kale, all picked small. Because they come from a variety of plant families, each has its own set of nutrients. Together, they're a multivitamin in a bowl. But yummy. Bon appetit.

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