

# Leave It To Lettuce

## Lettuce: An Early Spring Garden Treat

BY DAVID GRAPER  
SDSU Extension Horticulture Specialist

Lettuce is a wonderful vegetable for the early spring garden. The many colors and shapes of the lettuce leaves and also the flavors can add a wonderful diversity to a salad. There are dozens of different varieties and several types of lettuce that can be grown in this area that will have better flavor and nutrition than the iceberg type salad greens one often encounters in a typical restaurant salad.

### PLANTING LETTUCE

Lettuce (*Lactuca sativa*), like radishes, should be planted in the spring as early as you can get into the garden to work the soil. The plants can even tolerate a light frost. It is a cool season crop, growing best before temperatures get up into the 80's. The seed can germinate in fairly cool soils too, down around 45 degrees Fahrenheit but you will get better germination once the soil has warmed up to about 50-55 degrees Fahrenheit.

The seed of some lettuce varieties needs light in order to germinate. The seed is also quite small so barely cover the seed then gently firm the soil over the seed with your hand as you are planting. The seed is very light in weight so try to plant when the wind is calm. Since the seed is rather fine, people often plant the seed too thickly.

Try mixing the seed with a seed starting or potting soil mix, then scatter that in the row. The seed starting mix will help distribute the seed and also acts as a light covering for the seed to help it germinate more uniformly. You may also be able to find pelleted seed, which makes it larger and easier to plant more evenly.

Seed tape is also available — it has seed stuck to it in the correct spacing. Just lay out the tape in the row and you will be ready to go. Some people have made their own "seed tape" using toilet paper. Lay out a length of toilet paper. Mist it a bit with water then sprinkle out seed on toilet paper along the center of



the strip at about the spacing listed on the seed packet. Mist it again, then take one of the long edges and fold it over the top of the seed. Do the same with the other side. Firm down the layers with your hand and you are ready to take your DYI "seed TP" out to the garden.

No matter which way you sow your seeds, you can always thin out some of the extra plants if they get planted too thickly.

### SPACING

Lettuce can be planted in a single, double or triple row, with at least 6 inches between rows or spread out over a wider row, perhaps 12 inches wide. Just try to get the spacing between the plants about right. That will be particularly important for the loose head types of lettuce like Romaine or Butter Head. These types of lettuce have a longer maturity time and need more space to grow and produce a nice sized head. Lettuce can be planted in peat-pots or plug flats in a greenhouse or sunny window to get a jump on spring. The small plants can be transplanted to

the garden. The loose-leaf lettuce types are much more forgiving. If they have more room to grow, they will fill in, otherwise they will take up what space they have available to them. Usually there is plenty of seed in a couple packets of seed to satisfy the needs of a small family.

### LEAF LETTUCE BEST ADAPTED FOR THIS CLIMATE

Lettuce has been a popular vegetable since as early as 550 B.C. where it was cultivated in and around Egypt, Greece and Rome. In fact, we still grow varieties descended from some of those early wild selections now known as Romaine or Cos types of lettuce.

Leaf lettuce is the best adapted type of lettuce for production in gardens in our area. It is early-maturing, which means that we can often get a good harvest before the weather warms and the lettuce bolts or flowers. Leaf lettuce also offers the advantage of being able to be harvested multiple times. Just use a scissors or sharp knife to shear off the tender leaves, near the base of the plant.

New leaves will grow up in a week or 10 days so you can harvest it again. Generally, once the weather starts to get hot, later in June, lettuce will bolt, the leaves will get tough and taste bitter.

Try harvesting the youngest leaves, near the top of the plant to get the best of what is left. Then, pull the plants and add them to your compost pile. There are dozens of different varieties of leaf lettuce with leaf color ranging from plain green to pink, dark red, burgundy and nearly black. Some varieties offer speckled leaves too. Leaf shape can also be quite variable from mostly rounded to oak-leaf in shape or even more dissected and finely textured.

"Sandy" is an oak-leaf type of leaf lettuce that is a 2015 All-America Selections Winner.

Butterhead is another type of lettuce. It also forms heads, a bit more compact than Romaine but more rounded in shape than the Romaine types. Butterhead lettuce is also a longer season lettuce so try

starting seed indoors. It might be better suited to growing in cooler areas, perhaps in the Black Hills where the weather stays cooler into the summer. "Buttercrunch," a 1963 All-America Selections winner is still a popular variety of lettuce today. There are even smaller varieties that would work well in containers. Of course the leaf lettuce would also work well in containers.

Romaine lettuce is one type of lettuce that is significantly higher in important nutrients like vitamin C, vitamin K, pro-vitamin A and folate, compared to the typical iceberg type of lettuce. Red leafed Romaines as well as other red-leafed types of lettuce will also have higher antioxidant content. Lettuce is also a good source of fiber and minerals like manganese, potassium, iron and calcium, and is also low in calories.

For more information, visit the National Garden Bureau at [www.ngb.org](http://www.ngb.org) and search for lettuce or go to <http://all-americaelections.org/> to learn more about "Sandy" or "Buttercrunch" lettuce.

## Spring Flowering Shrubs to Try in Your Landscaping

BY JOHN BALL  
SDSU Extension Professor & Forestry Specialist

Early spring flowering shrubs have a special place in our landscapes as they are the heralds of the warm weather yet to come.

While our home landscapes should have interest year around, from spring and summer flowers to summer fruit to brilliant autumn foliage, a space or two should be devoted to an early spring flowering shrub or two.

One of the most commonly planted early flowering shrubs is the forsythia (*Forsythia*) also known as golden bell for its bright yellow pendulous flowers that lace every cane. Unfortunately, the most commonly planted species in much of the country, the border forsythia (*F. x intermedia*) and its many cultivars, are not flower bud hardy in South Dakota.

While the canes of the border forsythia can survive our cold winters, its flower buds are often killed when the winter temperatures dip below 10 degrees Fahrenheit — a frequent event during our South Dakota winters. Therefore, it is common in the spring to see border forsythias blooming only along the lower canes, the ones that were beneath the insulating snow.

Fortunately, there exists forsythia cultivars that are flower bud hardy to the Northern Plains. Probably the best known is "Meadowlark," a joint release by North Dakota State University and South Dakota State University that is flower bud hardy to below 35 degrees Fahrenheit.

"Meadowlark" forsythias are now in bloom across much of South Dakota and, despite the recent cold weather, almost every cane can be found lined with brilliant yellow blossoms.

There are two other flower bud hardy forsythias for our region. One is "Northern Sun," introduced by the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum and is flower bud hardy to below 30 degrees Fahrenheit and "Northern Gold" which is also flower bud hardy to below 30 degrees Fahrenheit.

### FORSYTHIAS

Forsythias reach a mature height and spread of about 6 to 10 feet so they need plenty of room in the home landscape. They also will slowly sucker out so will need to be occasionally cut back from taking over an adjacent flower bed.

Forsythias thrive under most growing conditions, except wet sites and are tolerant of slightly alkaline soils.

Forsythias are truly a single-season shrub as they lack interesting fruit, bark or autumn foliage color. They have only about one or two weeks of landscape interest during the spring flowering, but it's a pretty week or two during April.

### CORNELIANCHERRY

Another spring flower shrub that blooms at the same time as forsythia is the corneliancherry (*Cornus mas*) which despite the word "cherry" in the name, is actually a dogwood. This European native is prized for its mid-April yellow flowers that appear before the leaves veiling every branch with its blossoms. The flowers bloom for several weeks and withstand frosts.

The name corneliancherry comes from its cherry-like fruit. While the mid-summer fruit does resemble a cherry, bright red, though more pear-shaped than round, the taste will tell the two apart as corneliancherry fruit is very tart and a little too sour to eat right off the shrub.

The "cherry" is easy to harvest as you do not have to fight the birds for them but they should be picked fully ripe. The easiest way is to place a sheet beneath the shrub and collect the fruit as it falls. It is used for jams and preserves and even sherbet.

Corneliancherry is not hardy throughout the state and is best planted south of Highway 14 and east of the Missouri River. There are also a few nice specimens in the Black Hills.

The shrub almost becomes a tree when planted southeastern South Dakota where it reaches 10 feet or more. Corneliancherry is tolerant of most soils, though performs best on moist, well-drained sites that have neutral or only slightly alkaline soils. Protection from the north wind winds is necessary if planted near the northern limits of its range.

## Careful With Your Cutting: Pruning Red Raspberries

BROOKINGS — Raspberries are some of the best small fruits to grow in South Dakota.

"Home-grown berries can be picked at the peak of freshness and either eaten fresh or made into jams and preserves," said Rhoda Burrows, SDSU Extension Horticulture Specialist & SDSU Professor.

Although there are red, purple and black raspberry types, Burrows explained that the red types are better adapted to South Dakota's climate.

John Ball, SDSU Extension Forestry Specialist & SDSU Professor added that pruning raspberries, is needed to maintain overall plant health and berry yields.

"Red raspberries can produce a quart of fruit or more per linear row, but high-yield fruit production requires annual pruning," Ball said.

### RASPBERRY 101

Raspberries grow from canes, which are shoots that have few branches. While raspberries have a long-lived root system, Ball explained that the canes are biennials. "Meaning the individual canes live for only two years," he said. "A summer-bearing raspberry cane grows the first year, often to a height of 3 to 5 feet and then flowers and fruits the second summer before dying."

Ball said fall-bearing raspberry canes produce flowers and fruit at their tips during the late summer or fall of their first year and then a second crop lower on the same canes the following summer before dying.

"The best means of maintaining productive raspberries is to prune canes with heading cuts," Ball said. He explained that this is a type of pruning that stubs off the cane flush with the ground. "These heading cuts result in the formation of numerous new canes that sucker from the roots."

The heading cuts on raspberries must be made flush with the soil surface — lower than what is done with flowering shrubs — so the new canes arise from suckers rather than branches off the stubbed cane. Ball said that canes from suckers usually produce very little fruit and that which is produced is low quality.

### SUMMER-BEARING RASPBERRIES

Summer-bearing raspberries should have all their old, dead canes removed now if this task was not completed last fall. Some growers leave these canes up for the winter to serve as snow catches to provide snow to insulate the soil and additional spring moisture. These dead canes are easily identified by their greyer color and brittleness, and they often have a few mummified berries still attached.

Once these canes are pruned off, remove any weak canes. These tend to be shorter canes, only 1 or 2 feet tall, and are very spindly. Broken canes should also be removed at this time. After this work is completed, thin out the remaining canes so they are separated by about 6 to 8 inches. Do not tip back the ends of these canes as this is where the flowers will be most abundant.

### FALL-BEARING RASPBERRIES

Fall-bearing raspberries, which include both yellow- and red-fruited types, are

usually grown as a single fall crop rather than harvesting a fall crop and another crop the following spring. "The late-summer, early-fall crop of the first year usually has much higher yield and better quality than the summer crop the following year," said Burrows.

She added that fall-bearing raspberries will also begin fruiting a week or two earlier if the canes are grown for only the fall crop and not allowed to continue to grow into the second year.

If only the fall crop is desired, Burrows said, then all the canes can be pruned to the ground from November through March during the dormant season. Once the new canes sucker up in the spring, the canes should also be thinned to a spacing of about 6 to 8 inches apart. This pruning is usually done in late May or early June when the canes are about a foot tall.

If both the fall crop and the summer crop are desired from fall-bearing raspberries, begin by removing all the dead canes by the end of March. "These are the ones that fruited lower on the canes last summer, not the ones that fruited at the tip last fall," Ball explained.

He said it is usually easier to separate the two if this task is performed just after the two-year old canes fruit in the summer. Once these two-year old canes are removed, tip back all the one-year old canes, the

ones that fruited last fall, by pruning off about quarter of their length. "Remember, the summer crop occurs on the lower portion of the cane, not at the tips," he said.

### REDEFINE ROW EDGES EACH SPRING

Regardless of which raspberry is grown, spring is a good time to redefine the row edges. "Raspberries will sucker out beyond their beds and must be held in check with cultivation and mowing," Burrows said.

The width of the raspberry row should be about 2 feet. Wider rows, Burrows explained, may yield more fruit but not as much as anticipated due to the crowding.

The fruit is also more susceptible to diseases due to the poorer air flow. Running a cultivator along the edges to a depth of a foot will help hold the plants in place. However this is temporary as raspberry roots are very aggressive and will continue to expand out into the soil beyond the bed. Mowing or further cultivation will be needed during the summer.

To learn more, visit [iGrow.org](http://iGrow.org).



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