How to Grow Lettuce in a School Garden

Lettuce is a great addition to any school garden. It’s easy to grow, sprouts and grows quickly, doesn’t take up much room, and there are LOTS of kinds of lettuce to grow, explore, and compare. Seed packets always tell you what you need to know to grow, but here are some tips for growing lettuce in your school garden.

When To Grow
Lettuce is a cool weather crop that can be planted in Georgia in early fall or early spring. Lettuce can tolerate a light frost, but very cold or very hot weather will kill it. In Georgia, plant lettuce in mid-September for a fall harvest or in mid-February for a spring harvest. Contact your county’s Cooperative Extension Agent for exact planting dates for your part of the state.

Where to Grow
Lettuce works great in the ground, in raised beds, or in containers. Lettuce needs the soil to be moist, but not soggy, so it should drain well. The plants should get about 4 hours of sun daily. Lettuce grows well in full sun when the weather is cool, but in hot weather it does better in partial shade.

Planting
Lettuce seeds are easy to plant right in the ground, although you could start them inside in seed trays. Prepare the soil by breaking up any large soil clods, removing sticks and stones, and smoothing the planting area. Lettuce seeds require light to germinate, so don’t bury them! Instead, sprinkle seeds on top of the soil (in rows, or covering a whole area) and cover them very lightly. Water the seeds and keep the plants moist throughout the growing season.

TIP: Lettuce seeds are very small. To help kids plant them evenly, make a seed shaker. Take an old salt shaker, spice container, medicine bottle, or film canister, poke holes in the lid, and fill with lettuce seeds. You can even mix the seeds with light-colored sand so the kids can see the ground they’ve covered as they’re shaking out the seeds. This trick works great with all small seeds.

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Plant Care
Proper watering is the most important part of lettuce care. The plants’ roots are shallow and do poorly in dry soil. Since lettuce is mostly made of water, lack of moisture can also make lettuce leaves taste bitter. However, too much water can rot the roots and attract slugs! So keep the soil moist, but not waterlogged. Water once a day, in the morning if possible. Lettuce grown in raised beds or containers will need to be watered more often than plants grown in the ground. When you pick up a handful of soil, it should always clump together. If the soil is so dry it falls apart immediately, it needs to be watered.

Heat is another enemy of lettuce. If the temperature exceeds 70°F, lettuce seeds don’t sprout well, and mature plants start to “bolt,” or go to seed. This means the leaves stop growing and the plants start producing seeds on a tall stalk. Wait to plant until hot days are infrequent, use heat-tolerant lettuce varieties (seed catalogs will indicate this), water regularly, and create shade using a cloth, tarp, trellis, or other plants to protect lettuce from the heat.

Keep the area around plants weeded to keep unwanted plants from competing with young lettuce plants.

Harvesting
Lettuce leaves taste best when they are young and tender. Harvest them as soon as they’re big enough to eat (about 4-5 inches). If you are growing a head of lettuce, you can harvest the older, outer leaves as soon as they are large enough to use. Continue to do this until shortly after the head has formed. The heads should feel firm when they are ready to harvest, but probably won’t be as tight as lettuce heads sold in stores.

If you are growing a lettuce mix (loose-leaf lettuce), you can cut and come back! When the leaves are about 4 or 5 inches tall, use scissors to trim the leaves about an inch or two from the soil. (Be sure to leave some leaf growth—not just stems.) Make a salad, let the plants grow back, and harvest again, up to three times! The more you harvest, the more the plants will grow!

When lettuce grows too long, it starts to “bolt” or go to seed. The plant stops producing leaves and sends up a long stalk, producing seed pods at the top. Once the plant goes to seed, the leaves will start to taste bitter. Harvest as much as possible before this happens!

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