



Kevin Milaeger

Milaeger's

I See Greens on the Horizon

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It's only the beginning of February but I am already craving fresh greens. At Milaeger's we are growing lettuce and other greens year 'round in the greenhouse, so I usually have access to them. But I miss going out to my garden and

picking my own as the need arises, during evening salad preparation. Most years I can pick greens by April 10th or so. No, the plants aren't fully grown by that time. I grow primarily leaf lettuce; leaf lettuce and other leafy greens can be picked very early on in their growth cycle. I pick the outer leaves, leaving the new growth in



part of Milaegers winter greens production

the center so that there will be more to pick in a week or so. Some folks wait for the plants to get big, and then harvest the entire plant---that's fine too. I put in quite a few plants---I leave some to grow large while I harvest early

from the others. Greens taste great when young. Besides, if you don't pick them early, you might lose out to the critters---they certainly don't mind eating young greens.



assorted greens

You might be wondering if I am really picking fresh greens by April 10th, and I can say that most years I am indeed. I start with young starter plants from the "Greens to Grow" (G2G) program here at Milaeger's. We start the plants early so you can get a jump on the season. You

don't have to wait for the weather to warm up so you can plant seeds; you can grow some from seed a little later on if you want---I always do. Our G2G plants are available about April 1st. We grow over thirty varieties of greens, and about half of them are lettuce. [Click on this link](#) for our 2016 G2G list.

Here's how I get fresh greens around April 10th. By April 1st, I have chosen what types of greens I want to grow, and I've picked up about a dozen packs of them. I choose a range of varieties. They grow at different rates, and I want to make sure I have some available every day, all through spring. Also, their taste varies considerably, so I pick several kinds for one salad, and enjoy a greater variety of flavors. On April 1st our average high temperature is 48 degrees and our average low is just above freezing, 33 degrees. (Our record low for April 1 is 15 degrees, by the way.) On a decent weather day, if the five-day weather forecast is also favorable, I plant. This favorable forecast gives the plants a chance to get established before the next (inevitable) cold snap. I cover the plants if that cold snap is below the high twenties, or if there is an extended forecast for cool, windy weather. After all, the plants would like it warmer; they only just tolerate cool weather. By the 10th, I can usually pick a few greens, but if the weather continues cool, new growth will be slow and the next harvest might be ten days off. At Milaeager's we grow a second crop of many of these G2G greens---they will be available about three weeks after the first crop. You can usually get two or three harvests from each plant, but you'll want a fresh batch coming along for later use after the first batch declines in flavor.



assorted greens, ready for planting

Although lettuce seed will germinate in cool temperatures, I still like using transplants for the season's first foray into the garden; that way I can harvest



assorted greens, ready for planting

at least two weeks earlier than seed started plants. About the time I harvest my first greens from transplants, I plant some lettuce by seed. It germinates fairly fast by then, and I can begin harvesting young greens less than three weeks after the seed sprouts, providing the weather has been halfway decent. By that time I have harvested the starter plants a couple of times. The older lettuce plants don't taste as good as younger ones. That's why it's a good idea to plant

some seed regularly during the season, so that you always have young plants to harvest. Despite the robust good looks of the older plants, you are better off pulling them out once their taste changes, and using that space for another crop. This is kind of painful, especially when they look so great, but it doesn't make sense to keep plants that don't taste good, and will only become less palatable. You can be the judge of when that is.

I want my greens to have plenty of room, especially if I am growing wider varieties. (Remember, if its nutrition you are after, the leaf lettuces have by far the most value, especially those with "red" leaves.) Lettuce seed is fairly small, so it's easy to plant it too close together. To



do a good job of sowing, I mix regular kitchen sugar in with lettuce seed---I put it right in the seed packet, and shake it. Then, it is easier to see the seed, and it helps you space out the seed when you plant it in the garden. You don't want to accidentally pour a bunch of seed in one spot! Once the seed is watered in, the sugar dissolves and does not affect the plants. We used to use



greens planted two weeks

that trick in the greenhouse all the time, but nowadays our large scale seeding process is all mechanized. Lettuce garden before sowing the seed or

photo: burpee.com



Mesclun Mix

benefits greatly from compost added to the roots, so it gets all the moisture it needs from the top soil level, and the compost helps retain the needed moisture. Check your plants regularly to make sure they have plenty of water.

If you'd like to try something distinctly different in the world of "greens," try growing some "mesclun mix," either from starter plants or seed. There are many types of mesclun, and some are decorative, often with frilly edges. I like mesclun because it is a bit spicy (some types more than others) and it adds some zing to a salad; you can add a little or a lot, to your taste. We have mesclun mix starter plants in the G2G program; one is called "European Mesclun Salad." The seed catalog description says the flavors range from

"sweet mild to sour-hot-tangy" and there are a number of different colors, too. Plants in this mesclun mix include lettuce, radicchio, arugula, endive, orach, mizuna, kale, mustard, mache, and more. This is the sort of thing I add to other lettuce to liven up a salad, in whatever amount works.