

Van Hage Garden Article

Eat Well – Be Well - ‘Salads’

Skin is a remarkable barometer of our body's health and therefore reflects how well we are functioning internally.

Getting our bodies to function optimally is crucial to addressing many health related problems – eating foods which nourish us while limiting those which are toxic or provide little nutritional value is of paramount importance.

It sounds obvious, but drinking more water and eating plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables can make a real difference. A good diet consisting of fresh, untreated foods is essential to the health of our entire being, not just the surface skin.

Antioxidant-rich foods such as carrots, pumpkin, watercress, berries, broccoli, fish and seafood help boost our immune systems, protecting us from sun damage and pollution.

Homegrown foods can of course be 100% organic, eliminating the risk of chemicals from the start. Don't be fooled into thinking you need a large garden with acres of space to "grow-your-own" – in fact you don't need a garden at all! A sunny windowsill or pint-sized back yard can yield plenty of nutritious goodies to boost your body's health.

The familiar adage of "5-a-day" is easier to achieve than you might think especially if you are able to supplement organic shop-bought produce with homegrown seasonal delights.

Go for colour and variety in your diet – five servings that include red / orange / yellow vegetables, fruit and salads, 'purple' foods (such as sprouting broccoli – in season now), 'greens', seeds and bulbs, such as peas, onions, leeks and garlic.

'Sprouting Seeds' can be tremendous fun for children to enjoy, whilst also being a great way to engage an interest in food and understanding of its production. As the beginning of life in plant form, it stands to reason that seeds are full of natural goodness. Superb as accompaniments to soups, casseroles, curries, stir-fries or simply eaten raw in salads and sandwiches, 'sprouting seeds' are truly delicious and require absolutely no previous growing experience. Ready in as little as two days from sowing, seeds sprout easily in purpose-made clear plastic tiered sprouting boxes, or clean recycled jam jars on the windowsill.

'Living Greens' or 'Microgreens' are the next stage on – young sprouted salad seedlings, eaten before their first true leaves appear. Packed with intense flavours and rich in healthy nutrients, they are quick and easy to grow indoors, all year round, and are typically ready to eat in just 6-15 days from sowing.

Just like sprouting seeds and salad leaves, they too are ideal for spicing up sandwiches and salads, as garnishes or even in soups.

Tasty varieties of broccoli, chervil, Greek cress, purple radish, red mustard and Victorian rocket can all be grown in a similar way to mustard and cress, sprinkled on to trays of damp vermiculite. Sow liberally, leaving the seeds uncovered on the surface and keep moist by mist spraying daily. Place trays on a warm windowsill or in the greenhouse for the summer.

Harvest your 'living greens' with scissors as they develop – ready for use straight from the tray.

Easy to grow salad mixtures can provide all the baby salad leaves your family could need, saving a fortune over expensive supermarket pre-bagged salads. Sow in succession from March to October outside, or under cloches to extend the season. Typically leaves are ready to harvest in 25-30 days from sowing and may even be grown indoors on a brightly lit windowsill during the winter, to provide a complete year of harvest.

Simply pick the leaves, as you need them, leaving the parent plants in the ground to produce many more crops. For pristine leaves without the need to spray, float lightweight horticultural fleece over your rows permanently preventing leaf-biting pests from gaining access.

Try 'All Seasons Salad', a mix of Chinese leaf, Iceberg, Radicchio and finely cut Frisee lettuce leaves – delicious whatever the season. Or delicious 'Continental Salad' a mix of Romaine, Frisee, Lollo Rossa and Lambs Lettuce.

Herbs too, can be ideal for the windowsill or raised beds outdoors – perfect for spicing up salads and fragranced cooking. Add a few seeds to your lettuce salad mix or grow individually in pots on the patio, for fresh cut-and-come-again cropping.

IN THE GARDEN THIS WEEK...

- Highly perfumed Viburnum's come to the fore this month, leading on from winter flowering *V. farreri* and *V. x bodnantense* 'Dawn'. Spring flowering *Viburnum carlesii* and *V.x juddii* are often understated plants, quietly flowering soft pink buds despite harsh night frosts. But perhaps their greatest asset is the heavenly scent exuded by their clusters of tubular flowers.
- Two-colour planting works particularly well in spring, with lemon yellow and mauve or orange and pacific blue echoing the vigour of the season. Experiment with *Euphorbia*'s and 'Bowles Mauve' perennial wallflowers, soft yellow *Tulipa* 'Pagoda' and *Aubrietia*. While for the second category, try flamed tulip 'Princess Irene' under planted with blue *Chionodoxa*, refreshing orange *Violas* and spring green *Euphorbia myrsinites* to spice up your spring.
- Pot on homegrown tomato plants into individual 7cm pots, ready for planting out at the end of next month. Continue to protect from frost.
- If vine weevil have plagued your plants and garden in the past, take no chances with lingering problems from last year by treating all high-risk plants with a water-on vine weevil killer treatment. For best results, soil temperatures must be above 5C to stop active grubs in their tracts.