

History: Radicchio is a red-leafed chicory of Italian origin that makes a small, dense, round head. As with “zucchini” the “cchi” combination produces a hard “k” sound and is pronounced “ra-dee-kee-o”. The trimmed head is sized between an orange and a grapefruit and is colored wine red with raised white veins. This round type is called Chioggia; another type, which resembles a tiny, purple romaine lettuce, is called Trevisio.

Radicchio is slightly wild as compared to other heading vegetables like cabbage and lettuce. It is non-uniform, therefore not every plant heads well or at the same time. Until the introduction of Chioggia Red Preco No. 1, radicchio was even more of a gamble, requiring a precise but unpredictable combination of strain, climate, and planting date. The most reliable crops were produced by over-wintering, (in mild climates), then harvesting heads from new growth in spring. The new varieties, refined from Italian-bred Chioggia stock, do not require this or any form of cutting back of the leafy growth. Instead, they are grown much like head lettuce, but require two to four weeks more than iceberg or romaine. A much more uniform crop is possible with the new F₁ hybrids like Fiero.

General Cultural Information: Raise the crop just like heading lettuce, direct seeding or using 3-4 week old transplants. Crop maturity is 2-4 weeks later than romaine or iceberg lettuce.

To determine best planting dates and variety selection, we suggest conducting your own trails, by planting at 2 or 3 week intervals using at least 12 plants per variety. Most growers find the best results are from spring and fall crops (planted in mid-late summer for fall harvest). However, radicchio can handle summer weather in the 80's with occasional 90's, as long as it is not allowed to want water.

Long days and/or summer heat can cause bolting and tip burn. Bolting can also be caused by prolonged (several days) night temperatures of below 50°F in the seedling stage. Hence, crops started in the spring are safely grown from transplants. Radicchio prefers night temperatures on the cool side; therefore, summer crops are most successful in the regions where it generally drops under 60°F. In general, fall crops are more problem free and produce larger heads. Radicchio can take fall frosts very well, although growth in very cold weather is slow. We have harvested heads that were covered with snow and frozen solid, thawed them slowly, then peeled off damaged outer leaves to reveal the head in very usable condition. Harvest throughout the winter is possible where only moderate frost occurs.

Seeding and Planting: A Johnny's mini-pack contains about 100 seeds. Transplants are more reliable than direct seeding. We seed in a greenhouse using flats with small ¾" cells and a fine grade soilless starting mix, barely covering seed with a fine vermiculite. Ideal germination temperature is 75°F days and 68°F nights. After seedlings emerge (in 4 days with ideal conditions, but up to 14 days) feed with a soluble fertilizer such as Sea-Plus Liquid Seaweed. Seedlings should be ready to set out in about 3-4 weeks. We use rows 18' apart and spacing within the rows 8-10" apart.

Soil Preparation, Care and Harvesting: Soil and fertility requirements are the same as for lettuce. We use compost prepared with chicken manure, sawdust and straw. Control weeds with cultivation and hand weeding. Use of row covers might be ill advised if they moderate the day to night temperature fluctuations. Chicory is generally drought tolerant, but we suspect that uninterrupted growth will produce the best heads, so regular watering is desirable. Too much water and dampness encourages the same bottom rot problem found in lettuce, although radicchio is less susceptible.

Expect harvest to begin 6 to 8 weeks after setting out. In early plantings, some heads may take up to 3 weeks to form. Maturity is more uniform in fall, and heads will hold longer after forming. Radicchio is ready to cut when the head is firm like iceberg lettuce, and will not gain in size after that. When a large core begins to form in the center of the head, this indicates the beginning of bolting. Refrigerated dry in a perforated plastic bag, radicchio will keep up to 3 to 4 weeks very well and does not discolor if cut with a stain free knife.

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