

Salad Mix has grown in popularity to now be considered a standard crop in the minds of consumers and the stores and restaurants that sell to them. To participate in the production and marketing of this potentially high-value, year-round crop, and to compete with the mechanized, wholesale bagged salads that are available from distributors, the direct market grower needs to offer a product with a little something extra. Fortunately, salad mixes lend themselves to customization and a creatively blended mix can give a local grower an edge to penetrate this popular market. A local grower can also offer a fresh product that hasn't been sitting on a truck for days.

## What is Salad Mix?

Salad Mix is both a convenience food and a value-added product. Salad Mix is a blend of lettuces or other greens that are cut prior to full maturity and packed as loose leaves in bulk. The blend is a balance of color, texture and flavor that can be tailored to your specific market or customer. Salad Mix can be anything from a simple blend of fresh, baby lettuce leaves to a complex, custom mix containing Asian greens, herbs or edible flowers.

## How do I grow Salad Mix?

Planting methods vary according to the size of your operation, tools used, and the method of field management you prefer. Most growers plant multiple rows in a bed to maximize production. Seeds are sown to achieve a density of approximately 30 plants per foot in the row. The sowing can be done by making shallow furrows with a hoe, shaking the seed out by hand, and covering with a rake. A gravity flow planter, such as our European Push Seeder, plants at the proper density.

Depending on cultivation strategy, one can plant between three and seven rows per bed with approximately 10" to 12" between the rows. High-tech planting machines, such as our Six-Row Seeder, are available to plant at an even higher density, but weed control and other management considerations have to be able to handle it. It should be remembered that high-density plantings will also reduce air circulation and lead to a greater incidence of plant disease.

Lettuce varieties can be mixed prior to filling the planter or sown separately in their own rows. Mixed lettuce is beautiful and ready to sell, but sometimes additional flavors and textures are desired. Brassica greens such as Arugula, Mizuna and Tatsoi are common components of many mixes. They thrive on having a row of their own to accommodate their different sizes and shapes, but some combinations are compatible and their seeds can be premixed.

We suggest that you plant separate beds of lettuce and brassica greens. The brassicas are highly susceptible to flea beetles which perforate the leaves and reduce their marketability. The bed should be covered with a lightweight floating row cover at the time of sowing to exclude the beetles. The fast-growing greens should not need weeding prior to harvest, and the cover should be left on until harvest day. The planting can be cultivated to reduce weed competition, or a stale-bed technique of allowing weeds to sprout and be removed prior to sowing the crop can be used.

If you direct seed individual rows of each variety of lettuce and greens it enables you to create your mix as you harvest. It also lends itself to "fine tuning" your mix. If you have a customer that wants more red color or more pungent flavor in the mix, you will be able to add more of that ingredient because of the individual row plantings.

## How is Salad Mix harvested?

The greens are ready to harvest at around four weeks of age when approximately 4 to 5 inches tall. Typically, the brassica greens are ready to harvest one week earlier than the lettuces, so your mix will likely be made up of crops sown in different weeks. In general, lettuces are ready in 28 days, other greens in 21 days.

Most growers use sharp knives to cut at the base of the plant while holding a cluster of plant tops in the other hand. Cut the leaves about ½" above the soil line. The greens are placed in trays, baskets or other totes and carried out of the sun to a washing and packing area. Large producers are now using mechanical harvesters with a band-saw blade and conveyor belt. The Johnny's Greens Harvesters borrow this technology and are available in 3 sizes; utilizing either a 30", 42", or 48" wide blade with attached catch basket that can be operated by one person by hand.

Some varieties are "cut-and-come-again"; after cutting they will resprout and grow again. This can give you additional product when needed, but the quality of the second cutting will be lower due to the age of the plants and the presence of "stumps" from the first cutting. In order to have fresh, first-quality product to harvest every week, a new sowing should be planted every week during the season.

### **What yield can I expect and how much seed should I plant?**

This question is difficult to answer, but it is the most commonly asked question by beginning salad mix growers. If utilizing standard production methods, estimated yield would be one lb. of greens per six sq.ft. So, six rows in a bed would yield one lb. per linear foot. Only three or four rows in a bed would require closer to two ft. of bed space to yield one lb. A general rule of thumb for seed required is that planting 1/16 oz. of seed will yield 1 lb. of harvest. One oz. of seed will plant 96 sq.ft. and yield 16 lb. of greens. This will vary between the different greens and their corresponding seeds per pound, but it is a general tool for estimating.

### **How is Salad Mix packed/prepared for market?**

The components of the mix need to be washed, dried and cooled. It is a good idea to create your mix prior to washing, to avoid excessive handling of the wet greens which could result in bruising. The greens should be washed in cold water while on a screen or in tubs, or on a larger scale, while floating in a stock tank. Excess water should be spun off with a spin drier such as our Dynamic Salad Spinner. Many growers have made a large spinner from an old washing machine. Some use mesh bags to hold the greens as they go in and out of the washtub. It is important to cool the greens as much as possible to increase shelf life. Blended, washed Salad Mix can be brought to market prepackaged in plastic bags of various sizes such as 5 oz., 8 oz. or 1 lb bulk. The standard size purchased by restaurants is usually 3 lb., packed in a plastic bag inside of a labeled cardboard box. See your local Extension Service or Dept. of Agriculture for further information.

### **Which varieties can I use for Salad Mix?**

The standard mix available from distributors is usually a blend of baby lettuces, mizuna or tatsoi, baby kale, beet or spinach leaves, and the broken up leaves of mature radicchio or frissé heads. The beauty of salad mix is that any combination can be made and marketed to fill a niche. A spring mix of all baby greens could be offered, an Asian greens mix with no lettuce, or a simple all lettuce mix that is easy to make. A basic recipe might include: mixed baby lettuces, arugula, mizuna, tatsoi, and baby spinach. You might offer your own standard mix and then customize as requested.

Johnny's Selected Seeds offers several premixed blends of seeds to help you get started. They vary from different combinations of lettuces to blends of the most popular brassica and mustard greens. As they become more experienced, most growers prefer to grow each variety separately so that they can create custom blends. Some lettuce varieties are the perfect shape for cutting loose at a young age, while others such as butterheads are not suitable, being bred to produce an attractive head when mature. At Johnny's we evaluate each variety for its best use, and denote that in our catalog. Our staff can recommend the more popular items used in the industry, and you can improvise according to your intuition.

### **Where do I find a market for my Salad Mix?**

Many growers have been successful in selling their Salad Mix at their own roadside stands or at farmers' markets. Some have supplied Salad Mix to local retail stores. A likely market for your produce is the restaurant business. Go to the local restaurants and talk to the chefs. Good restaurants will be seeking the freshest ingredients possible. Tell them what you can provide. You can even show them a Johnny's catalog and let them tell you which ingredients they prefer.

### **How can I create a unique look for my Salad Mix?**

The addition of edible flowers to your mix can add unique interest, color, and flavor. Try nasturtiums, calendulas, violas, pansies, small-bloomed marigolds, scarlet runner beans, borage, etc. Some also incorporate herbs such as chervil, dill or cutting celery into the mix. Use your imagination!

The size at which you harvest is also up to you. Many CSA programs offer the leaves a little larger than the bagged salads seen in stores. At the 5-6 week stage, Asian greens can be sold as a ready-to-cook braising or sauté mix. To complement your braising mix, make a selection of peppers, snow peas, broccoli florets and summer squash available to your customers. Your customers will have a complete dinner, and you have a great sale!

Updated 10/09 sb/jeh