



Submitted photo

A mesclun salad with chevre (goat cheese) on toast makes a great snack.

## Potting salad greens pays off in summer fare

By Arthur O. Tucker

As I get older, it seems that my vegetable garden requires more attention and inevitably gets neglected. At the end of the summer, it's a tangled mess.

Last year, as an experiment, I planted several mesclun mixtures in large (2 to 3 feet) pots. Mesclun is a mix of salad greens or pot-herbs chosen for taste and color. The mesclun mix was so easy to plant and harvest, especially because the pots put everything at knee height. In addition, because the pots were closer to the house, I could monitor them better and adjust watering when needed.

I have collected blue ceramic pots, but lately I have become intrigued by the large, sturdy blue plastic containers with nylon rope handles in the garbage can section of the hardware stores; they are relatively inexpensive and it's easy to drill holes in the bottom for drainage (and easy to lift after filling with soil). I prefer a light, airy soil of 50 percent coarse perlite, 25 percent peat moss, and 25 percent leaf mold or compost. I use granular time-release fertilizers for pots or water every two weeks with a diluted soluble 5-10-5 fertilizer.

This year I have vowed to plant salad greens that I have always wanted to grow but never seemed to have the time or space to plant. The leafy lettuces and other cool-season plants become bitter and faded with the heat, so this year I am also planting several salad greens that do well in the heat of summer. In addition to my leafy lettuces, kales, and spinaches in various shades of green and red, I am planting the following salad greens:

Cool-season annual salad greens. Miner's lettuce (*Claytonia perfoliata*) is prob-

ably the most cold-tolerant of the salad greens (it can even be grown year-round in a cold frame or cloche) with heart-shaped leaves high in vitamin C. Corn salad or mache (*Valerianella locusta*), especially the large-leaved "Vit" cultivar, also does best in the very early spring and late fall. Garden cress (*Lepidium sativum*) is a noxious weed in my garden but with very tasty leaves reminiscent of radishes.

I just cannot do without arugula (*Eruca vesicaria*) or wild arugula (*Diplotaxis muralis*) for the spicy, peanut-like taste of the leaves; I usually let my plants reseed themselves for a fall crop. Orach (*Atriplex hortensis*) has purple leaves that taste of beets; I am anxious to try the new "Double Purple" cultivar with crinkled, purple leaves.

The mustards (*Brassica spp.*), with leaves that do indeed taste of mustard, seem to do best in the cool weather but can often be depended upon to produce some leaves in the summer. I have always grown the oriental mustard mizuna, but this year I am adding "Ruby Streaks" with purple, ferny leaves. The edible chrysanthemum (*Chrysanthemum coronarium*) will often have leaves (and flowers) that are still good in the heat of summer but are best in the cool of spring.

Warm-season annual salad greens. Probably the best salad green for summer and virtually the only leafy source of omega-3 fatty acids is the garden weed purslane (*Portulaca oleracea*), especially in the large-leaved and golden forms. Every year I

plant trailing nasturtium (*Tropaeolum majus*) because the plants seem to produce more of the round leaves than the standard clumping form; both the tangy leaves and flowers (in reds, yellows, and oranges), reminiscent of radishes or watercress, are edible and look great in sandwiches.

Malabar spinach (*Basella alba*) is a vine that has thick, deep green, 3-inch by 2-inch leaves; they are delicious either stir-fried, steamed, boiled, or raw in salads with a taste that is somewhat reminiscent of beets. Amaranth (*Amaranthus cruentus* x *A. powellii*), especially the new cultivar "Double Color," has both good nutrition and aesthetic appeal with its red and green leaves. This year, a very new salad green for me is strawberry spinach (*Chenopodium capitatum*) with both green leaves and bright red, edible fruits.

I've already planted sprigs of watercress (*Nasturtium officinale*) from the grocery store in clay pots submerged in dog dishes of water; the spicy leaves that taste of radishes are very distinctive in salads or sandwiches. New Zealand spinach (*Tetragonia tetragonioides*), with succulent leaves rich in vitamin C, tastes somewhat of spinach.

Short-lived perennial salad greens. My mother always made a spring salad of early dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*) greens, wilted in a hot bacon dressing over mashed potatoes; later in the season, the greens will become too bitter to eat. I could harvest dandelions from the wild (I don't spray my lawn), but this year I am planting the red-stemmed "Italiko Rossa" cultivar.

The endives and radicchios (*Cichorium intybus*) require more care than most salad herbs to force heads that are crisp but not bitter. Salad burnet (*Sanguisorba minor*) has leaves that taste of cucumbers all season long. Good King Henry (*Chenopodium bonus-henricus*) has leaves that are spinach-like, best in spring. The sorrels, such as the French sorrel (*Rumex scutatus*), are good for their leaves with a taste reminiscent of tomatoes, either in salads or in a French sorrel soup, but men of my age should avoid this vegetable because of the high content of oxalic acid that might lead to kidney stones (often composed of calcium oxalate).

The fine, ferny leaves of bronze fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare 'Rubrum'*) are also tasty as a salad herb, and the snipped leaves add an anise taste to salads (in addition to looking like black hair to freak out my guests).

Sources. Many of these salad greens are coming more and more common and can often be picked up at your local garden store. If you cannot find them, try Territorial Seed Co. (<http://www.territorialseed.com/>), Johnny's (<http://www.johnnyseeds.com/default.aspx>), Seed Savers (<http://www.seed savers.org/>), or Seeds of Change (<http://www.seedsofchange.com/>).

On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations, and uses. Call 302-857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost) to arrange a tour of the Herbarium, and call 302-857-6408 (Dr. Arthur Tucker) for more information about this article.

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