



Mini Head Lettuces Offer Gardeners Delicious, Affordable Salad Options

— by Orin Martin

The term mini head lettuce refers to lettuces that are either –

- Genetically small at maturity, such as short romaine types and small-framed butter lettuces
- Any leaf or romaine type spaced intensively (4–8" apart) and harvested immature, as a whole plant, at about 20–30 days following transplanting.*

For the home gardener, this format for growing lettuce offers high yields from small spaces, diversity and variety of color, shape, size, taste, and texture, as well as a low-cost way to create delectable salads from your backyard garden plot or container garden. For the market grower, it offers high yields, rapid bed turnover in the field, a stunningly attractive presentation and big time “ka-ching, ka-ching” at the cash box. The old joke being,

Baby lettuces (formerly “yuppie chow”):

- 3 times the planting density
- 1/3 the time in the ground
- 3 times the price per unit—what’s not to like?

So if you’re tired of paying \$3–4.50/lb for high-end mini romaines and butter lettuces, why not try growing them yourself?

Mini head lettuces are not simply immature full-size varieties, but rather varieties that are bred to be small but plump at harvest. What they lack in stature, they deliver in density; the heads are exceedingly weighty for their size. While they may be diminutive (4" wide x 4–6" high), they often weigh in at 1/3 of a pound (+ or -) per head.

Romaine Types

Some of these types are truly crosses between romaine and butterheads. That is, the overall plant and leaf presentation speaks of romaine, while the creamy, blanched silky hearts scream—butterhead!

Undoubtedly, the leader of the pack is the old English heirloom variety alternately referred to as Little Gem or Sucrine. Seems any time you attach a French word to a vegetable, the law of economics dictates the price soaring double or treble—*aubergine* for eggplant, *mangetout* for sugar peas, *courgette* for zucchini and, the most outrageous, *haricot vert* for snap beans. Hey, they’re just skinny beans. While I’ve been growing Little Gem for about 20 years, I’ve been unable to track down its date of origin. So much for the omnipotence of the internet. I even checked with the British Leafy Greens Association (now, there’s an interesting group to run with.)

Little Gem is only 4–6" tall and 3–4" wide. Thus, the plants can be spaced ultra-intensively in the garden bed or window box: 4–6" between plants, with rows 6" apart, leading to high yields per square foot. The overall appearance is romaine-like: upright (keeps both slugs and grit at bay) and cylindrical-bullet shaped. The outer leaves are “spoonbill” shaped with a pronounced, juicy midrib. It’s got the requisite romaine crunch, too. This is all well and good, but the double dividend is the silky, butter-sweet heart that is blanched creamy yellow-gold. Catalogues list it as being mature at 33 days. Patience is, as they say, a virtue. Little Gem is fully mature with a heavy heart at 48–55 days post transplant.

An exciting presentation for this or any mini romaine variety is to split it longitudinally, lay it out on a long platter, and slather it with the dressing of your choice. Add a sprinkling of pine nuts and crumbles of white Stilton cheese laced with either dried apricots or cranberries and a wild pandemonium will set in amongst the dinner guests. The in-season inclusion of fresh pears will require crowd control.

Other Mini Green Romaines of note:

Tintin (Thompson & Morgan Seeds), 60 days. A later-maturing, supposedly improved Little Gem. It is and it isn’t. The improvement is that it is both more disease and bolt resistant with a more bubbly or puckered leaf. While the taste and texture is good, it is, nonetheless, a pretender to the throne.

Winter Density (Johnny’s, Territorial Seed Co., Wild Garden Seed), 54 days. A good 3-season mini romaine, fall–spring. Slightly bigger (8–9" tall) and both slightly darker and denser.

Claremont (Johnny’s), 46–50 days. A slightly bigger, darker Winter Density “wannabe.”

*It takes about 30 to 40 days of post-germination growth to produce a transplant in 6 packs or plug trays. Germination should occur in 5 to 10 days with soil/air temperatures 55–70°F.

News & Notes

Red Romaines

Little Leprechaun (Territorial Seed Co.), 57–60 days. Perhaps the “wee people” have been dabbling with performance enhancers—it is taller (10”) and wider than most. Leaves are a mahogany red overlaid on olive green.

Petite Rouge (Territorial Seed Co.), 48–50 days. Oval, cabernet-colored leaves with distinct puckering (puckering = crisp). This compact 6–8”-tall plant is good for container or windowbox growers.

Dazzle (Territorial Seed Co.), 40 days. New, quick and small; head fits into the palm of your hand and the heart is dense. Foliage is ruby red/sienna. Cute too.

Marshall (Territorial Seed Co.), 65 days. An 8”-tall compact plant, with a firm heart, upright habit. Leaf color is burgundy gone dark. Flavor is sweet with a crunchy texture.

Small-Framed Butterheads

Australe (Johnny’s), 45–50 days. This red-mottled, green-leafed beauty produces small, dense, buttery heads that top the class in both taste and texture. The fly in the ointment is that it bolts quickly at maturity. Simply whisper the words “long days, warm temps” and it is gone.

Focea (Johnny’s), 42–45 days. Great for stripped-down butterhead production. Juicy, sweet, buttery, dense heads hold well in the field and fridge.

Blushed Butter Cos (Territorial Seed Co., Wild Garden Seed) 50 days. Has a bit of an identity crisis as the name implies (Cos is a corruption of Kos, an island in the eastern Mediterranean where romaines are alleged to have been first grown). At 8–10” tall, call it a tall butterhead or a short romaine. Very buttery flavor, good cold tolerance, okay heat tolerance. Ruffled leaves are red, mottled with green.

Deer Tongue, Red and Green Leafed (Johnny’s, Wild Garden Seed, Seeds of Change), 46 days. This old heirloom dates back to the 1840s. Mild taste, good crunch. Despite what the catalogues say, only good for spring and fall production.

Speckles (Territorial Seed Co.), 50 days. Extremely buttery, blanched, dense heart. Old Amish heirloom that still “brings it.”

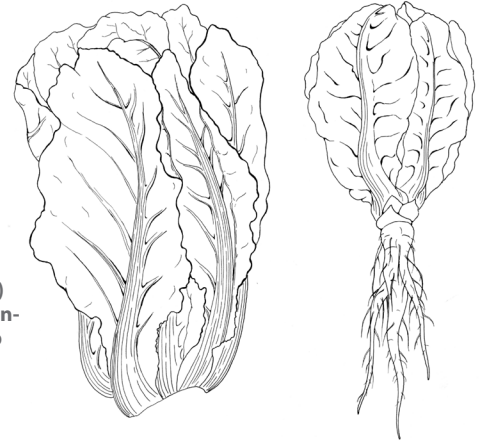
Buttercrunch (Territorial Seed Co., Johnny’s), 48–50 days. Small (6–8” tall), oblong-shaped, firm-headed butter type. Thick, dark-green outer leaves with yellow-creamy heart, smooth and sweet. Can take a bit of heat for a lettuce.

Too Many Seeds of One Variety? Renee’s Garden Seeds Offer an Elegant Solution

Sometimes elegant solutions are all about simplicity. Such is the case with Renee’s Garden seeds.

The problem: too many seeds of one variety for the backyard gardener. After all, do you really need 39 seeds of any given bell pepper? How about 13 seeds of 3 varieties in a single packet of seeds?

Both full-size Romaine (left) and mini Romaine (right) varieties offer gardeners a rewarding crop for superb salads.



Janet Chao

The solution: Renee Shepherd and crew offer a novel solution to the above problem—summer squash, peppers hot and sweet, heirloom tomatoes and other vegetables that are color coded. The coloring is a harmless vegetable dye. On the back of the packet is a legend indicating which color = which variety.

A slightly different format exists for a lot of Renee’s leaf crop vegetable packets, including some you’ll see at this year’s Spring Plant Sale.

Caesar Duo—featuring a mix (equal parts) of red (Cimarron) and green (Noga) romaine lettuces. They can be harvested young for salad mix in a cut-and-come-again format, as a whole plant at the “teenage” phase, or let go to majestic full maturation.

Blush Batavians—French Batavian lettuces are the most versatile of all classes of lettuce: They serve well as cut-and-come-again babies in a salad mix; at 40 days post-transplant they offer a handsome full-leaf lettuce; in another 15–20 days you get a loose butter-type head; add another 15–20 days of patient waiting and you’ll end up with an ersatz head lettuce.

The Blush Batavian combines thick and crunchy leaves with a refreshing sweetness. The Batavians are also both the most cold and heat tolerant of all lettuces. The Blush Batavians mix includes:

- *Carioca* – with intense red leaves
- *Soprano* – green and wavy leaved
- *Rossia* – red-tinged leaves

Garden Babies—features small-framed, baby butterheads. They’re cute as all get out, tasty too.

Sweetie Baby Romaine—ranks up there in the pantheon with Little Gem for its diminutive size, serious sweetness and killer crunch.

Other seedlings from Renee’s Garden Seeds offered at this year’s Spring Plant Sale include:

- Heirloom Cutting Lettuce Mix
- Baby Mesclun (cut and come again)
- California Spicy Greens

Renee’s Garden Seeds are available at www.reneesgarden.com and at local retail outlets.