Beyond nutrition, the appeal of a salad mix is in its blend of ingredients for visual effect, variability and depth of tastes and textures. The aim is to stimulate the full range of your taste buds. There are four major taste groupings:

1. **Tangy, spicy or piquant** – many herbs such as basil, sweet marjoram (especially the flower heads), oregano, the hot mustards, pak and bok choi, cresses, sorrel (with its high oxalic acid content), mature arugula, shungiku, orach, amaranths...

2. **Bitter** – radicchio, endive, dandelion, chicory.

3. **“Sweet”** – lettuces, fennels, chervil, anise, hyssop, lavena flowers, tarragon

4. **Mild** – mizuna, spinach, beet greens, kale, chard, mache, tatsuoi, mei quin, tah tsai, misome

Texture can be divided roughly into two categories –

1. **Smooth** – lettuce (leaf and butter), mache, spinach, young arugula, chard, kale, beet greens

2. **Crunchy** – mei quin (stems or petioles), pak choi, endives, raddichio, chicory

When all factors are combined, the result is a veritable symphony for the palate!

I have always puzzled at most pre-mixed mesclun collections offered by seed companies. A typical mesclun mix often contains –

- lettuces — 30–40 days to mature
- arugula — 20–30 days to mature
- radicchio and endive — 90 days to mature
- chervil and mache — 70–90 days to mature
- cresses and mustard — 20 days to mature

Basically the quick-germinating, tall-, and fast-growing species will dominate the early harvest period and then go to seed, and thus outcompete the slow- and low-growing ingredients. The true, intended full flavor of the mix will never be realized because of the extreme disparity in growth and maturation rates. Notable exceptions are several of the salad mixes from Renee’s Garden (www.reneesgarden.com or many independent and garden centers), including the Italian Misticanza and the Paris Market Mix.

So . . . buy the constituents individually (this may also prove to be more economical) and create a sensible mix yourself. Or even better, sow separate species (a block of low-growing species and a block of rapid-growing species) in separate rows or blocks. The separate-species approach affords gardeners the luxury of being creative in an impromptu fashion at harvest time.

— Orin Martin
TIPS ON USING SALAD MIXES*

Salads aren’t just lettuce anymore! They can be created from a myriad of ingredients unified and enhanced by an array of dressings. Increasingly, prewashed mixes are available that take much of the labor of preparation out of salad making, but they spoil fairly quickly and cost more per pound. Mesclun, the mixture of baby lettuces and greens sold at markets, typically contains seasonal greens that range from mild to spicy to bitter. Much labor can be saved by investing in an inexpensive salad spinner, the bigger the better!

Usually, salads should be tossed with dressing just before serving, or dressing can be offered on the side. If heavy ingredients are included, add them last and don’t toss but scoop from the bottom of the salad bowl to serve. If the salad is to be marinated, allow at least 1 to 2 hours for the marinade to do its work.

Salad ingredients and dressings should complement and contrast. Mix sharp with sweet, spicy with mild, crunchy with creamy. Combine strong flavors with other strong flavors (spinach with onions, tomatoes, and feta or kale with red cabbage, scallions, capers, and chopped egg).

Select dressings that balance the salad (light, sharp oil and vinegar dressing with a rich salad or a sweet, creamy dressing with a simple cabbage slaw).

VARIATIONS ON VINAIGRETTE

Basic Vinaigrette

2 tablespoons cider vinegar or 3 tablespoons lemon juice or a combination
1/2 teaspoon dry mustard or 1 teaspoon Dijon mustard (optional)
1/2 teaspoon salt or to taste
Freshly ground pepper to taste
6–8 tablespoons olive oil, other vegetable oil, or a combination

In a small bowl, whisk vinegar or lemon juice, mustard, salt, and pepper until salt dissolves. Slowly whisk in oil. Alternately, combine vinegar or lemon juice, mustard, salt, and pepper in a covered jar and shake vigorously until well combined; add oil and shake until blended.

Italian Vinaigrette

Substitute balsamic vinegar for the cider vinegar and lemon juice and add one clove of minced garlic, or add a crushed clove and allow to stand for at least one hour before removing clove and serving.

Vinaigrette for Mixed Greens or Citrus Salad

Add a tablespoon minced shallot or green onion and a little grated lemon or orange rind to the basic recipe.

*Excerpted from Fresh from the Farm & Garden: Seasonal Recipes for Busy Cooks, published by the Friends of the UCSC Farm & Garden.