



# the cook's salad garden revisited

a New Zealand guide to growing  
& preparing salads

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craig potton publishing

**To our parents and grandparents,  
who gardened and made salads in the 20th century,  
and to our children and grandchildren,  
who do the same in the 21st.**

#### **BY THE SAME AUTHORS**

*The Cook's Garden* (1980), *The New Zealand Bread Book* (1981), *More from the Cook's Garden* (1987), *The Cook's Salad Garden* (1997) and *The Cook's Herb Garden* (2001).

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Cover illustration: corn salad (*Valerianella locusta*), see page 62.

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# introduction

Both cooking and gardening are important family traditions in New Zealand. In previous generations they tended to be separate operations, with a clear-cut division between the cook and gardener, and between the kitchen and the vegetable garden. By the end of the 20th century, cooks and gardeners were often the same people, both men and women contributing to the growing and preparation of food. Some food plants are now raised in the kitchen, or on that popular transitional zone between inside and out, the deck. Meals are often consumed in the garden. The old separation between ornamental flower garden, through which visitors were proudly conducted, and the practical vegetable plot, tucked out of sight at the back of the section, has vanished. The new kitchen garden is usually bright with flowers and we don't think twice about entertaining friends there.

To accompany this new 'seamless' kitchen-garden continuum, we have changed the structure of our meals. Salads, once served as an occasional side dish, are prepared daily in many households and frequently are complex enough to constitute a main dish. In the 21st century, salads are increasingly varied in composition and play an important role in maintaining good health. Garden size may continue to decrease, and possibly the time available for gardening. A greater proportion

of the garden space is devoted to salad plants.

We believe that these significant changes in both garden and menu call for a re-examination of their interrelationships. A recipe book devoted to salads or a manual on the cultivation of salad plants will not achieve this by itself. An integrated treatment is required that stresses the continuity between growing and preparation for the table.

Though the changes appear to be new and forward-looking, we are not required to reinvent the salad. We can build on the long tradition of salad making and kitchen gardening that stretches back well over a thousand years. Understanding the historical cycles of salad making and the rise and fall in popularity of salad ingredients and cultivation techniques has shown us the foundation principles and essential core of this ancient dish. These have guided our own experiments.

## what is a salad?

So many dishes are described as salads that you might wonder if they have anything in common. There are fruit salads, green salads and flower salads. Salad ingredients may be raw, pickled or cooked. There are salads that combine all of these ingredients and all of these stages of processing, in glorious and exciting mixtures, while others offer



# the ideal salad garden

Very few gardeners are lucky enough to have the ideal site. However, with careful planning, a successful salad garden can be created within the limitations imposed by site, climate and size. Each garden and gardener is unique, so no hard and fast rules can be laid down.

## location

Ideally a salad garden should be in the open, not too close to trees or buildings. Most salad plants are sun-lovers, especially during the cooler months of the year. At the height of summer, light shade in the middle of the day will benefit tender young greens. This can be provided by deliberately planting taller crops, such as cabbages or beet leaves, on the north side of a seedling crop or by constructing shade-cloth screens or tunnels to be positioned as required.

Shelter from wind is also an important requirement. As we live in a windy part of the world (much of the country lies in the roaring forties), windbreaks are vital. Solid structures, such as fences and buildings, are not helpful as they create funnelling effects and down draughts. Trellis or open-slatted fences, hedges, hardy-shrub

borders and wind-cloth screens all make efficient windbreaks for the salad garden as a whole. Crops will also benefit from individual shelter during the coldest and windiest seasons. This can take the form of cloches, tunnel houses, glasshouses and temporary structures such as plastic-pipe hoops covered with plastic sheeting or netting (see page 34). Even when frosts are not a problem, winter protection from wind and rain will provide optimum growing conditions for most salad plants.

Young transplants in a windy garden can be protected by tin or plastic collars. Food cans with the tops and bottoms removed or cut-down plastic drink bottles with their bases removed are suitable. They are pushed about 3–4 cm into the ground around young plants and then removed 2–3 weeks later, once the plants have become established. These cans also protect the young seedlings from slugs, blackbirds and cats.

In frosty areas, avoid siting a salad garden in a frost hollow. If possible choose a site that slopes gently towards the afternoon sun. This orientation avoids rapid thawing of frost on plants, which may rupture the leaf cells. The slope also contributes to good cold-air drainage. Where frosts are inevitable,





choose from the many protective structures and materials now available. Unheated glasshouses and tunnel houses are the ultimate (as they protect the gardener as well), but cloches, plastic pipe hoops covered with plastic or frost cloth, and floating row covers (which are water permeable) are also helpful. In areas that experience greater than  $-5^{\circ}\text{C}$  frost, a double layer of protective material may be needed. A floating row cover is placed directly on top of the plants and then a cloche or covered hoop sits above with an air gap between the two layers. Mary finds that a single layer of frost cloth works in light frosts, but when frosts are more severe, any leaves that are touching the cloth get burnt.

Accessibility is another point to consider. In nearly all the cultivation advice given in this book for the individual salad plants we have stressed the need to incorporate large amounts of organic matter into the soil. This material has to be brought to the site, so easy wheelbarrow access is important.

## soil

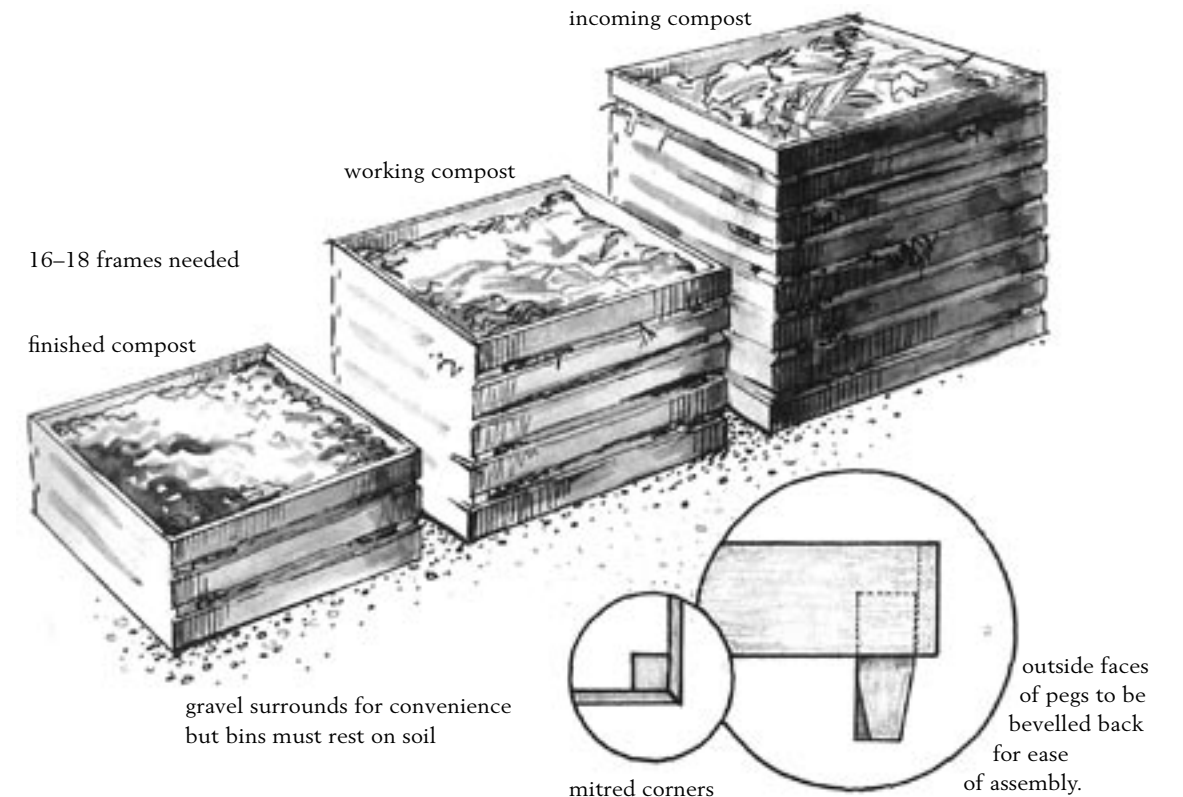
The ideal soil is a deep sandy or clay loam with a friable crumb structure, free draining but moisture retentive, high in organic matter and nutrients, and with a pH between 5.5 and 7. You may be lucky and find that your soil has these attributes, but in many situations the gardener will need to make improvements. The soil may be sandy and easy to work but dries out rapidly and loses nutrients by leaching with heavy rain. It may be a heavy clay, which is hard to work and slow to warm up but which is moisture retentive and rich in nutrients. An improvement to each of these extremes is fairly simply accomplished by adding lots of organic matter and by building up the beds. Extra organic matter will improve the texture of the soil, the drainage and moisture retention, and will increase nutrient levels. Built-up beds improve drainage, help the soil to warm up quickly in spring and

increase the depth of top soil. Raised beds with sandy soils tend to dry out too quickly so leave them at the original ground level. The following materials may be used as organic matter for composting or mulching:

- straw (e.g. pea, barley)—must not have been sprayed with weedkillers
- spoiled hay
- haystack bottoms
- mushroom compost—may increase pH too much as it contains lime
- straw and dung
- old sawdust—must not be from tanned wood
- commercially made compost—must not contain material that has been in contact with weedkillers
- crushed dags
- sheep manure
- chicken manure
- horse manure
- seaweed and lakeweed
- leaf litter
- home-made compost—must not contain material that has been in contact with weedkillers

Unless well rotted, most of these materials are best cycled through a set of compost bins or left in a heap for six months to mature. If this is impossible, use them fresh but add a rich source of nitrogen, such as blood and bone to counteract nitrogen depletion caused by the rotting process. Commercial and home-made compost can be used alone and immediately.

The pH measurement of a soil indicates its degree of acidity or alkalinity. Neutral is 7; below this is acid, and above is alkaline. Most salad plants prefer a neutral or slightly acid soil. When the pH is too high or too low, the availability of nutrients is reduced. If you are starting a new garden or have



*Home-constructed compost frames.*

difficulty growing leafy crops in an existing garden, it may be worth your while to have the soil tested. Kits for measuring pH are available from some garden centres, though these are not always very reliable and at best should be used as a rough guide only. If necessary, and no more than every 3–4 years, a light dusting of lime is a good choice for vegetable gardens as it also contains the essential nutrient magnesium. It should be applied at the rate recommended by a soil test or at the rate of  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup per square metre for sandy soils or 1 cup per square metre for clay soils. Be careful not to add too much lime, as soil scientists tell us that overliming is a common problem in New Zealand gardens.

Soil fertility is determined by the levels of various nutrients present and their availability. We have found over the years that, providing we keep adding plenty of well-rotted organic matter to our gardens, our salad crops thrive. When you think of the large quantities of organic matter in the form

of vegetables that you remove from the soil, it is not surprising that similar amounts in the form of compost, manure, and so on must be added to maintain structure and fertility.

We recommend home-made compost as a reliable and convenient source of organic matter. Our simple composting method utilises vegetable kitchen scraps, annual weeds without seed heads, chopped prunings from shrubs and perennials, small quantities of lawn clippings, raked-up autumn leaves, whatever animal manure is available, and a compost activator, though it is debatable whether this last is necessary. A reasonable amount of cut-up twiggy material is incorporated as we find that it keeps the mixture well aerated and sweet smelling, and it speeds up the composting process. We do not add any diseased plant material and are



# radicchio & green-leaved salad chicories



The botanical name for the chicories is *Cichorium intybus*. *Radicchio* is the Italian word for the mainly red-leaved chicories grown for winter salads. Judging from our collections of recipe books, the word radicchio has now largely replaced the English term leaf chicories. This name change has cleared up much of the confusion relating to the many different types of chicory.

Witloof chicory is grown for its pale-green chicons, produced from the roots that are lifted and later forced in the dark. Some chicory varieties are grown for their edible roots, which are eaten raw, grated in salads or cooked. Another root chicory is grown commercially as a coffee substitute. The green-leaved chicories, also called 'sugar loaf', are grown mainly as a salad plant. These are included with radicchio in this section.

Radicchio is harvested during the cooler months of the year, making it an important salad crop in a cook's garden. The plants are robust, will withstand several degrees of frost and are easily grown. Cold weather actually improves their colour, reduces their bitter taste and, in the case of some varieties, encourages the formation of tight heads.

The beautiful leaves range in colour from light red through to dark purple-reds and even

variegated forms. All have prominent white ribs, which contrast with the brilliant leaf colour. The green-leaved chicories are also attractive with pale yellow-green to dark-green forms.

They have a characteristic bitter flavour, which is not always popular with people brought up on only mild-flavoured lettuce salads. Bitterness can vary according to the variety, the stage of growth and the season. Baby leaves and inner heart leaves of mature plants are the least bitter. Cold temperatures reduce bitterness, as does blanching by covering each individual plant with an inverted flowerpot or tying the outer leaves together at the top. Once a taste is acquired for them, they can become quite addictive.

## varieties

Seed companies offer a range of green-leaved chicories and red radicchio varieties. When searching through a catalogue look under both 'Chicories' and 'Radicchio'. Some varieties are

*Opposite: radicchio leaf colours vary.*





## back in time: chicory

IN ITALY, CHICORY VIES WITH LETTUCE for the position of prime salad 'green' and may have done so for 2000 years. In recent decades its popularity has spread, if the success of radicchio in café menus and mesclun mixtures is any indication.

The wild perennial *Cichorium intybus* was widespread in Europe, Western Asia and around the Mediterranean, but its first cultivation seems to have occurred in Italy in Roman times. According to Theophrastus, the Greeks used it uncultivated as a pot-herb. Compared to lettuce, chicory is generally hardier and more resistant to pests, though the price of that resistance is bitterness. Since efficacy in medicines is often linked to bitter taste, chicory's long history as a medicinal plant is not unexpected, nor is its consumption as a boiled vegetable. What intrigues us today is how it came to be so desirable as a salad vegetable.

Italians grow different sorts of chicory for their roots, leaf and flower stalks, leaves and mature hearts. Their root chicories are used like winter radishes, or forced into producing tender shoots, while the edible flower stalks of some radicchetta chicories are cooked like asparagus. They have dandelion-shaped leaves, and in one variety ('Dandelion Red Rib') the bright stalks are eaten. Of the numerous chicory varieties grown for their leaves, the radicchio group is most fashionable. In leaf colour they can be blond, red, or variegated. Several radicchio rosso (the reddest) varieties have been available in New Zealand since the late 1980s. Some form round heads (e.g. 'Red Verona', 'Fancy' and 'Palla Rossa Early'), while others have long leaves that are tied round the heart in order to blanch it (e.g. 'Red Treviso').

Green-leaved chicories occur as heading types that look like upright cos lettuces (e.g. 'Sugarloaf'), or as rosettes of looser leaves. In all chicories, bitterness is most intense in outer leaves exposed to sunshine. The protected hearts of the sugarloaf varieties are

therefore sweeter and more tender than rosette types. But bitter leaves mixed with blander salad greens are also much appreciated by Italian consumers and for this reason they grow several varieties only slightly 'improved' from wild chicory. One classical Roman poet expressed this taste as being 'welcome to jaded palates.'

While Italian climates permit the overwintering of many chicory varieties outdoors, northern European countries have had to employ cloches or lift the crop for winter storage in a clamp (an earth-covered mound) or sand-filled bin in a cellar. It has been claimed that this practice led to the discovery in Belgium that the chicory roots, trimmed of their leaves before storage, would produce tender white buds (called chicons) if the sand was moist and the temperature was around 10°C. But Italians were forcing chicory roots in this way by at least the late 16th century. Whatever the origin of the practice, the Belgians developed and improved the large-rooted variety 'Witloof' (white leaf) specifically for chicon production. Chicons are frequently braised but are also a welcome winter salad vegetable. Recent chicory selections in this witloof group are for plants that can form a firm chicon in a cool, dark place, without having to be buried or covered.

In the early 19th century, one other type of chicory ('Magdeburg') was developed for processing into a coffee substitute or additive. Coffee and chicory essence was a common alternative to tea in New Zealand households before the advent of instant coffee. It is now grown as a source of inulin, a useful carbohydrate.

In the 16th century, Elizabethans often called chicory 'succory', a word that they spelled at least 12 different ways! Their salad recipes often specified 'white succorie'. This was a large-leaved chicory that was dug up in autumn, had its leaves tied to prevent soil getting between them, and was then buried in earth or sand until the leaves were blanched white,

and were less bitter and more tender. Such tying and sand burial were ancient practices, described first by the Roman writer Pliny.

Until the 18th century, chicory was also a pot-herb, or ingredient in a 'boyl'd Sallad'—these usually consisted of cooked vegetables dressed with oil and vinegar. Chicory lost ground to the increasingly popular endive during the 18th century and was

omitted from most English gardening books published after 1730. Victorians knew it mainly as a coffee substitute, and until the striking radicchio rosso varieties arrived in New Zealand in the 1980s, chicory appeared in our seed catalogues only as 'Witloof' for forcing chicons, or 'Magdeburg' for processing into a coffee substitute. What a wealth of salad material we had been missing!

bred to form tight red hearts, while others have a more upright form similar to the shape of a cos lettuce. New additions may be promoted as either red or green baby-leaf crops. Check the suggested sowing and harvesting times and choose types best suited to your climate and kitchen needs.

### cultivation

Chicories are unfussy plants, growing well in a wide range of soils. The addition of extra organic matter will be beneficial in sandy or heavy clay soils.

Radicchio is usually sown directly in the garden from mid-summer to early autumn. Summer sowings are best in cooler climates to allow the plants to be well grown before winter. Germination can be erratic in hot weather, so it is wise to water the drills thoroughly before sowing. Sow seed 5–10 mm deep in rows 25–30 cm apart.

The green-leaved chicories can be sown from spring to mid-autumn as a baby-leaf crop, though protection is needed for winter crops in cold areas. Young baby leaves can be harvested when 5–10 cm long.

Once radicchio plants are touching, start thinning progressively until they are 12–15 cm apart. At this stage they are left to heart up. From



*Radicchio at large seedling size for early harvesting.*





*Radicchio.*

our experience the size and shape of the hearts vary considerably. Some plants never form tight hearts but still produce attractive rosettes of brightly coloured leaves that can be cut for the salad bowl. Leave the stump in the ground to regrow another 'head'. The new growths can be forced and blanched by covering the stump with an inverted flowerpot on which a stone is positioned to block light from getting through the drainage hole. Do not cover wet plants, as rot is likely to be a problem. Check for slugs and snails, for they seem to love clay flowerpots. Upright radicchio plants can be blanched before their first cutting by tying the tops of the outer leaves together. Blanched leaves are a beautiful pale pink colour and are said to be less bitter, though we haven't noticed much difference. Natural blanching occurs in any hearted specimens.

In colder areas radicchio will produce more usable leaves if the plants are given protection from hard frosts, gales and rain. Half-grown chicories can be transplanted into an unheated glass or tunnel house, or plants can be protected with cloches or covered plastic-pipe hoops *in situ*.

### harvesting

Harvest individual baby leaves, 5–10 cm long, and thinnings for mixed salads. Leave some plants to heart up. By late autumn some will have developed tight round heads, some looser conical heads, and others rosettes. Cut the heads or rosettes off above ground level and allow the stumps to resprout. The older varieties are cut back in late autumn and they produce their heads later, in winter or early spring.

### in the kitchen

Use the tender, lighter-coloured centre leaves. Wash and dry the leaves thoroughly. If radicchio is an unfamiliar salad ingredient, introduce it gradually by combining it in small amounts with milder greens. Bitterness can be reduced by slicing, adding naturally sweet ingredients to the salad bowl, such as dates, pineapple or any sweet fruit, and by using a sweetened vinaigrette as a dressing.

For radicchio lovers, balance the sharp taste of the leaves with robust-flavoured dressings and extra ingredients, or contrast texture and taste with smooth and gentle additions such as avocado or ripe pears.



*Green-leaved salad chicory.*



## radicchio, fetta cheese & fennel seed salad

Serves 2–4

**torn radicchio leaves**

**a few lettuce leaves (optional)**

**1 stalk celery, strings removed, sliced thinly**

**6–8 black olives, stoned**

**50 g fetta cheese, cut into cubes**

**½ red capsicum, seeds discarded, flesh cut into strips (optional)**

### dressing

**3 tablespoons olive oil**

**2 tablespoons lemon juice**

**¼–½ teaspoon crushed fennel seeds**

**1 clove garlic, very finely chopped**

**pinch salt**

**freshly ground black pepper**

Combine the radicchio, lettuce, celery, olives, fetta cheese and capsicum strips in a salad bowl. Whisk the dressing ingredients together in a small bowl. Drizzle dressing over the salad and toss gently. Serve immediately.

## radicchio & avocado salad with croûtons & anchovy vinaigrette

Serves 4

The smooth texture and gentle flavour of avocado contrasts well with the crispness and robust taste of radicchio leaves.

### dressing

**2–3 anchovy fillets**

**a little milk to cover**

**grated rind of ½ lemon**

**1 tablespoon lemon juice**

**4 tablespoons olive oil**

**freshly ground black pepper**

**radicchio leaves, roughly torn, to cover a platter or**

**4 individual plates**

**2 avocados, cut in half, stones and skin removed,**

**flesh cut into cubes**

**croûtons (see page 189)**

**1 tablespoon finely chopped parsley**

Soak the anchovies in the milk for 30 minutes to help remove saltiness. Drain and force through a sieve into a small bowl. Add the remaining dressing ingredients and whisk to combine.

Arrange the radicchio and avocado evenly on the platter or plates. Sprinkle with the croûtons and parsley. Drizzle the dressing over the salad and serve immediately.

## radicchio, walnut & parmesan cheese salad

Serves 2 as a light main-dish salad

Using bread as a base for salads is an Italian tradition. The bread should be substantial and have a home-made character. It is usually toasted and rubbed with garlic before being placed in the bottom of a salad platter.

**2 thin slices of wholemeal or wheatmeal bread**

**1 clove garlic, peeled**

**1 tablespoon olive oil**

**¼ cup freshly shelled walnuts**

**1–2 heads radicchio**

**a few lettuce leaves (optional)**

**1 tablespoon walnut oil or olive oil**

**1½ tablespoons red-wine vinegar**

**½ teaspoon Dijon-style mustard**

**pinch salt**

**freshly ground black pepper**

**30 g Parmesan cheese**

Toast the bread lightly on both sides. Cut the garlic in half crosswise and rub all toast surfaces. Lay the toast on a serving platter.

Heat the one tablespoon of oil gently in a small frying pan. Sauté the walnuts until lightly browned. (Be careful not to scorch them.) Remove from the heat and allow to cool.

Meanwhile, slice the radicchio and lettuce leaves into long strips. Combine in a bowl.

Add the walnut oil, or second measure of olive oil, vinegar, mustard and seasonings to the frying pan. Stir to combine thoroughly. Pour over the radicchio and toss gently. Pile equally on each slice of toast. Use a potato peeler to cut thin shavings of Parmesan cheese. Scatter over the salad. Serve within 30 minutes.

## radicchio with celery, pears & parmesan

Serves 4

The idea for the lemon and leek vinaigrette used to dress this salad comes from the inspirational book *Open-House Cookbook* by Sarah Leah Chase.

### dressing

**4 x 1 cm thick slices of leek**

**1 teaspoon Dijon-style mustard**

**1 tablespoon tarragon vinegar**

**1 tablespoon lemon juice**

**6 tablespoons olive oil**

**¼ teaspoon salt**

**freshly ground black pepper**

**radicchio leaves, roughly torn to cover a platter**

**a few other salad greens, torn (optional)**

**2 small or 1 larger stalk of celery, strings removed, stalks cut into thin slices**

**2 smooth-textured, ripe pears**

**shavings of Parmesan cheese (use a potato peeler)**

**2 tablespoons toasted sunflower seeds (see page 188)**

Place all the dressing ingredients in a food processor. Process until the leek is well chopped.

Arrange the radicchio leaves and other greens on a large platter. Sprinkle with the celery slices. Peel the pears, cut into quarters and remove the cores. Cut each quarter into several smaller pieces, roughly even in size. Place over the leaves. Sprinkle with the Parmesan and seeds. Drizzle with the dressing. Serve immediately.