

Fresh and Smart Salads

On the Andres farm we haven't been able to cut any alfalfa yet this spring, but the leaf lettuce in our raised bed is going nuts – both figuratively and realistically. My favorite salad this spring has been sliced strawberries and almonds (hence, the aforementioned nuts) over a bed of fresh leaf lettuce and spinach. It's pretty easy to find great recipes online or in your favorite standby cookbook. Trying new salads can help put variety into your salad choices and keep you from getting bored with eating fresh produce. Keeping salads fresh with variety is smart, too! Leafy salad greens are rich in such nutrients as Vitamin A, Vitamin C, beta-carotene, calcium, folate, fiber, and phytonutrients. They contain no cholesterol and are naturally low in calories and sodium. This makes lettuce a smart choice for a healthier lifestyle.

Let's take a look at how the ingredients in common salads can boost nutritional intake.

Leaf Lettuce: The nutritional value of leaf lettuce slightly varies depending on the variety (see Table 1).

Table 1. Nutrients in various lettuce types.

Nutrient*	Units	Lettuce Type				
		<i>Iceberg</i>	<i>Green Leaf</i>	<i>Red Leaf</i>	<i>Romaine</i>	<i>Butterhead</i>
Vitamin A	IU	502	7405	7492	8710	3312
Vitamin B-6	mg	.042	.09	.100	.074	.082
Vitamin C	mg	2.8	9.2	3.7	4	3.7
Vitamin K	mg	24	126	140	103	102
Folic Acid	mcg	29	38	36	136	73
Niacin	mg	.123	.375	.321	.313	.357
Riboflavin	mg	.025	.080	.077	.067	.062
Iron	mg	.41	.86	1.2	.97	1.24
Potassium	mg	141	194	187	247	238
β-carotene	mcg	229	4443	4495	5226	1987
Lutein + Zeaxanthin	mcg	277	1730	1724	2312	1223

*100g fresh weight/USDA National Nutrient Database for Standard Reference, Release 24 (2011)
Shaded cells indicate highest values.

Source: Colorado State University Extension, "Salad Greens, Health Benefits and Safe Handling", Fact Sheet No. 9.373

Although Iceberg lettuce is a common staple in many leaf lettuce salads, it doesn't shine as one that has significant nutritional value. Many people prefer Iceberg because of its sweet taste and crisp texture. However, mixing it in with one or more other leaf lettuce varieties would raise the nutritional value of a salad.

As you can see from Table 1, the lettuce variety that gives you the overall highest nutritional value is Romaine. Not only does it have the highest amount of Vitamin A, it also far exceeds the nutritional value of any other leaf lettuce in folic acid, potassium, beta-carotene, and lutein.

Carrots: Carrots are an exceptional source of Vitamin A. In fact, a single serving (1 whole 7" carrot) contains 110% of our daily need of Vitamin A. Vitamin A is good for our eyes, helps with our night vision, and keeps our body cells and tissue healthy.

Strawberries: These small fruits are packed with Vitamin C. Eight (8) medium sized strawberries, which constitute a single serving, contain 160% of our daily requirement of Vitamin C. This nutrient is needed to help heal our body of cuts and wounds, promotes healthy gums, and helps our body absorb iron and folate from other plant sources.

Almonds: Not only are these nuts high in calcium, iron, and fiber, almonds are a good source of protein. Their light taste and chewy texture add interest to green leaf salads and many fruit salads, as well.

Radishes: These small vegetables are a good source of Vitamin C. A single serving of radishes contain 30% of the Vitamin C your body requires daily.

Green Cabbage: This strong flavored vegetable can provide 70% of your body's daily need for Vitamin C, and adds fiber to your diet.

Broccoli: This vegetable is packed with nutritional value. A medium stalk of broccoli contains an astonishing amount of Vitamin C (220% Daily Value) and provides your body with much needed iron, calcium, and Vitamin A. Additionally, it contains a high level of fiber (12% DV). Fiber adds bulk to our diet, promotes healthy gastro-intestinal functioning, helps to give a sense of "fullness" when eating and is associated with reducing blood cholesterol levels.

Celery: It should be no surprise that celery provides fiber to the diet. However, you might be surprised that it is also a good source of Vitamin A (10% DV) and Vitamin C (15% DV). Two stalks of celery comprise a single serving which contributes a mere 15 calories to the diet.

Additional vegetables high in Vitamin C to add to your salad mix include **bell peppers, summer squash, cauliflower, and tomatoes**. Dice these up into a green salad to add extra nutritional value, color, and flavor.

Eating a salad every day is a good way to help you reach and maintain a healthy diet. Many who are watching their waistline may be struggling to find new and fresh ways to eat salad. There's good news, though. There are boundless variations to a simple leaf lettuce salad to "mix up" your salad routine and add more fresh vegetables and fruits to your diet. Adding additional ingredients to a basic salad is a great way to add to its nutritional value.

Try this **Caribbean Bean Salad**** for something new:

- 4 cups ready-to-serve romaine lettuce
- 1/4 cup red onion, chopped
- 1 cup canned black beans, drained and rinsed
- 1 orange, peeled and diced

- 1 tomato, diced
- 1 Tbsp. olive oil
- 3 Tbsp. red wine vinegar
- 1 tsp. dried oregano
- black pepper to taste

Toss all ingredients together in large salad bowl. Serve immediately. Serves 2.

**Source: Karen Thomas, Family & Consumer Science Agent, Penn State Extension

For more information on healthy eating and nutrient-dense foods, give me a call at the Geary County K-State Research and Extension office 785-238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!