About – There are numerous varieties of lettuce or “salad greens” as they are often referred to available in the market today. The wild predecessor of modern lettuce is believed to have grown along the shores of the Mediterranean Sea more than 2,000 years ago. The Roman, Greek and Egyptian cultures all embraced these wild greens. Today, lettuce in numerous varieties is consumed throughout the world. While most of the world eats these lettuces raw, some cultures, most notably the Chinese, typically eat these leafy vegetables cooked.

Lettuce, in all of its varied forms, is a temperate crop that we find in many summer gardens across the United States. Commercially, California is far and away our leading supplier of variety lettuces accounting for over 75% of all production. With year-round availability, these colorful, tasty, healthy salad greens can be a part of everyone’s diet.

Varieties – As mentioned above there is a diverse assortment of these leafy vegetables from which to choose. Listed below are several of the more popular varieties that can be found in most supermarkets.

Green Leaf: Green Leaf grows from a central stalk in a V-shape, loosely bunched ending in a crisp, curly leaf. It is very mild and its decorative nature lends itself to being a popular garnish.

Red Leaf: A cousin to Green Leaf, its leaves transition from green to red at the tip. It has the same taste with slightly softer leaves.

Romaine: This is an upright, elongated bunched variety with a fairly compact head. One of the most popular of all variety lettuces, it is the main ingredient in Caesar salad. The medium to dark green leaves are very crisp the midrib is especially delicious.

Red Romaine: This variety of Romaine lettuce has dark green leaves that fade to red at the tips. While still crisp, it is tenderer than the green variety of Romaine.

Bibb: A round head type lettuce with loose outer leaves. This is a variety of Boston or Butter lettuce that was developed in Kentucky by John Bibb. The leaves of Bibb lettuce are extremely tender and so they need to be handled with care. It has a very delicate flavor.

Butter: Also known as Boston lettuce, this is very similar to Bibb lettuce but with wider, leaves that are lighter green in color. Butter lettuce is so named because of the soft leaves that melt in your mouth like butter. Butter Lettuce has a delicate, sophisticated flavor and is often paired with fruits in its presentation.

Red Butter: Red Boston is any other name given to this variety of lettuce. It has the same characteristics of texture and flavor as its green counterpart with leaves that fade to a light red at the tips.

Endive: This lettuce grows in a loose, V-shaped head similar to Green or Red Leaf. The leaves are very curly, almost frizzy or lacy, in appearance. They fade from green to white as they get closer to the center of the head. Endive has a slightly bitter taste.

Escarole: This is actually a variety of Endive. Escarole has pale green leaves that are broad and curly. The taste is somewhat milder than Endive.

Selection – Look for heads that have fresh-looking leaves that are not wilted or broken. There should be no brown spots or evidence of decay and the very tips of the leaves should have little or no brown (called tip burn). The stalks of the leaves should not be russeted. Varieties that have thicker leaves, like Romaine and Escarole, should be quite crisp.

Storage – Variety lettuces should always be refrigerated. Most often they are purchased in a plastic bag or perforated wrapper. Leave them in the open plastic bag or wrapper and place them in the crisper drawer of your refrigerator. Avoid commingling them with fruit as the natural ethylene gas given off by pears, apples and the like will cause the lettuce to russet. Avoid crushing delicate varieties such as Boston, Bibb or Red Leaf.

Preparation and Uses – Without a doubt the single most popular use for variety lettuce is in fresh garden salads. However, they find their way into many a sandwich or hamburger and are often used simply as a garnish. As mentioned before, certain varieties are also braised or cooked in some fashion.

Handle these greens gently breaking off only as many leaves as you need for the occasion at hand. Wash the leaves thoroughly in a stream of cold water then pat dry with a paper towel. An inexpensive investment for those that prepare a lot of fresh lettuce salads is a “salad spinner” to remove the water. When preparing a salad, it is preferred to tear the leaves with your hands rather than use a knife. Using a knife will cut the cell walls and cause the lettuce to discolor. Once the leaves have been washed and broken apart, they can be stored in a sealed container in the refrigerator for one or two days.

Nutrition – While it is true that variety lettuces are mostly water, they do contain a number of important nutrients. They all contain varying amounts of vitamins A and C as well as several trace minerals like calcium and iron. As you might expect, variety lettuces are all very low in calories.

For more information visit: fresheverydayproduce.com