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Home > Advice > Winter salads from the garden

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winter salads from the garden

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It never ceases to amaze me that, even in exceptionally cold weather, I can still walk outside my kitchen door and pick a trugful of salad and good bunches of several herbs. I don't mean the obvious evergreen herbs – bay, rosemary and sage – which will, of course, be there – but soft, bright green leaves of coriander, flat-leaved parsley, sorrel and the relatively new, hardy biennial herb, par-cel. You would think all of these would look and taste terrible after a night in the freezer at -5C (23F), but they don't. Some just thaw and appear as if nothing has happened, while others get knocked back, but start to grow from the heart of the plant within a few days.

Most of my winter herbs and salads are planted on quite a sheltered bank. The frost and snow still hits them and yet – with the right varieties of plants – the whole place goes on producing almost as many meals in winter as it does in the high peaks of summer.

The hardiest of the lot are the kales. You could grow these anywhere in Britain. They're delicious if you harvest the smallest baby leaves and tips. You can never buy them, so you don't realise what you're missing, but they are crunchy, with a sort of intense iron-rich flavour and always delicious. You want to grow at least one variety of kale, but if you have room, go for three, Kale 'Redbor', Kale 'Cavalo Nero' and Kale 'Red Russian'. You can strip them bare, time after time in the winter and they'll come back with more. 'Kale Redbor' looks the best, with statuesque plants with crimson-black stems and deep crimson, frilly leaves.

You can pick almost every leaf, leaving behind only a little tuft of new ones at the crown and within a week, baby leaves shoot all the way down the stem. It's a miraculous plant, 100 per cent cut-and-come-again, and quickly too. These small tender leaves are excellent in salad, and the bigger ones – the leaf stripped from their stem – make delicious Chinese "seaweed". Shallow fry them in hot oil for less than a minute and sprinkle with salt and soft brown sugar.

'Kale Cavalo Nero', or black Tuscan kale and 'Kale Red Russian' are excellent too, good raw when young and – again de-stemmed – fabulous, quickly fried with hot chilli, bacon and garlic, with a small splash of stock or water to help wilt the leaves.

Early autumn-sown parsley will keep growing right through the winter inside in the greenhouse or outside in my garden. The perennial French sorrel never seems to stop either. I picked a bowl of bright, perky leaves this morning after a night of -3C (26.6F). Par-cel is a great newish addition to the winter herb garden, a Japanese leaf celery, with a taste halfway between parsley and celery, excellent for stocks, soups, risottos and stews.

Coriander is the other invaluable winter herb. Grown in the summer it's a washout. But sow it almost anytime after August until April and it's a different story. I've been picking fistfuls of coriander every week this winter – nothing seems to stop it growing. Pulses are good for eating at this time of year and coriander transforms them all from something rather earnest, to one of the most delicious winter meals (see recipe, below).

Then there are of course the stalwart winter salads. My current favourite salad is a mix of four leaves – about 50 per cent lettuce to provide the background bulk, 30 per cent punchy-flavoured cut-and-come-again leaves, scattered with a handful of herbs (15 per cent) and a few flowers (5 per cent) on top for good measure. The best lettuces for continual light, winter production are the soft, round lettuce 'Valdor', the loose-leaved



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varieties, 'Lettuce Green Salad Bowl' and 'Lettuce Cocarde' and a bit of crunch from 'Lettuce Cancan' and 'Lettuce Black Seeded Simpson'. For strong-tasting leaves, there's salad rocket (much better sown and grown now, than in the hot, dry summer), mizuna, winter purslane, and any of the hardier mustards – 'Green in Snow', 'Golden Streaks', 'Red Giant' or 'Red Frills'. Grow two or three of each of these two groups.

Add any of the herbs above and a few winter-flowering pansies, or early primrose flowers, and you have the perfect salad. You can sow any of these salad varieties in the autumn – those plants will now be producing – but you can also sow them in February, to keep you in delicious leaves until the spring sowings of salads really get going.

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