

# Arugula, Rocket, Rocket Salad

*Eruca sativa* is a member of the Brassicaceae (mustard) family.

The edible leaves of arugula are characterized by a distinctive sharp, spicy, pungent, peppery flavor similar to that of mustard greens. It is a low-growing, 8- to 24-inch herbaceous annual with green, deeply cut compound leaves. Plants grow densely and develop white or yellowish blossoms with deep violet or reddish veins. Native to the Mediterranean region, arugula grows wild throughout southern Europe.

## Market Information

**Use.** Ancient Romans and Egyptians considered arugula to be an aphrodisiac. The British cultivated it for centuries, and it was in the earliest gardens of New England. Today arugula is popular in Italy, France, Spain, Greece, and Egypt; its popularity is growing in the United States. In India, arugula is grown primarily for the oil that is obtained from the seeds; the leaves are not used.

Arugula may be harvested as an entire plant or as individual leaves cut from the plant. Raw in mixed salads, the leaves complement both bland butterhead lettuce and bitter chicories. The best time to use it raw in salads or in tomato dishes is when the serrated leaves are only 2 to 3 inches long. Arugula can be steamed, cooked as a potherb, or puréed and added to soups. You can freeze harvested leaves for later use, like spinach or other greens.

## Culture

**Climatic requirements.** Arugula is a cool-season vegetable. In summer, the leaves will develop an unpleasantly strong flavor, and plants will bolt.

**Propagation and care.** For best results, plants should grow quickly and steadily. Leaf flavor gets stronger with warm weather and less irrigation. To ensure optimum growth and flavor, sow seeds early in cool weather in loose, well-composted soil. Keep the soil moist.

Sow the seed as early in spring as the soil can be worked, about ½ inch deep in rows 12 inches apart. When seedlings are 2 to 3 inches tall, thin plants to 6 or 9 inches apart. For a continuous crop, make sowings every few weeks. In mild winter areas, sow again in fall for winter harvest.



*Arugula or rocket salad grows to a height of 8 to 24 inches. (Photo: Hunter Johnson)*

Arugula is also an excellent late-season crop. Sown in early fall, it can withstand light frost. As the weather turns cold, protect the plants with cold frames or row covers.

Leaves will be ready to harvest 6 weeks after planting, when the plants are between 8 and 10 inches tall. At the peak of freshness, the leaves are dark green and somewhat smooth. A furry underside indicates toughness. Continuous harvest of young leaves will encourage further leaf production and a more prolific crop. The leaves become bitter after the plant has flowered, when the flat, open plant becomes leggy and will grow to a foot or more in height.

Harvesting is done by hand. The harvester cuts, bunches, and packs the crop into cartons in the field. Keep the leaves clean. Arugula is extremely perishable and needs gentle handling and rapid marketing.

Flea beetles can cause major problems as the weather warms.

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## Sources

### Seed

NOTE: Seeds are widely available.

### More information

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