

Radicchio, Red Chicory

Cichorium intybus is a member of the Asteraceae (sunflower) family.

Radicchio varieties include "forcing" and "nonforcing" types. Forcing types are Red Verona (small, deep red head with flavorful bite at maturity) and Treviso (resembling a small romaine lettuce, with a long, conical red head with white midribs and crisp, tangy leaves). Nonforcing types include Palla Rossa (popular in the United States; dark green exterior leaves, and a head with elongated red leaves and pure white ribs), Castelfranco (semi-heading variety with a loose red and white inner head surrounded by green leaves streaked with rose, pink, green, or bronze in cold weather, milder flavor, more heat resistant); Castelfranco Variegata (crumpled foliage is striped red and yellow), Chioggia (variegated red and white; tighter head than Castelfranco), Giulio (round, compact, red head with very good color; resists bolting), and Cesare.



Mature radicchio with the leaves peeled back. (Photo: Charlotte Glenn)

Radicchio is a red, broadleaf, heading form of chicory. Its leaf colors range from pink to maroon with white midribs; variegations include bronze and almost yellow streaks with green. Some cultivars form loose heads, while others have folded leaves and resemble small cabbages. Leaf texture is similar to but stockier than that of a French endive. The red coloration increases during the colder months.

The first growth of many radicchios is green. The green leaves are tough and very bitter. If these leaves are cut back in fall and the winter is cold, the second growth will be bright red or magenta.

Market Information

Use. Radicchio is a popular European salad vegetable and garnish produced largely in Italy. It has a distinctive, bitter flavor, and is eaten raw or lightly grilled or roasted. Its flavor and color add zest to salads and other dishes. Americans prefer to use the bitter-tasting leaves sparingly. In Italy, there are at least fifteen well-known kinds, from the flat, dark rosettes of Ceriolo to the long, thin leaves of Selvatico da campo to the variegated pink and pale green of Castelfranco. Radicchio also serves as a colorful garnish.

The edible flowers have a faint chicory flavor. They must be used immediately after picking, since they remain open only in the morning hours.

Culture

Propagation and care. Cultural practices are similar to those for endive, escarole, and lettuce, but radicchio requires a longer growing period than lettuce (80 to 85 days in the Salinas Valley) and so may require an extra irrigation. Sow seeds $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ inch deep from September through March. In Salinas, radicchio grows on a standard 40-inch bed with a 22- to 24-inch bed top. Two rows grow 12 to 14 inches apart on each bed. Down the row, plants grow every 10 to 15 inches depending on the stand before thinning. Raw seed can be precision seeded with a vacuum-type seeder, but other precision seeders require coated seed. The tops will withstand frost and low temperatures (to 20°F) for short periods. Some radicchio has been transplanted using transplanting modules or plugs.

In the warmer inland valleys, the summer heat can cause bolting and tip burning, so August and September plantings are recommended. Growers should experiment to determine the best planting date for each variety. Some varieties perform best on lighter, better-drained soils. In the Salinas area growers can seed the crop during the summer (March to August) if they use adapted varieties.

Harvest rates are low, sometimes in the 20 to 40% range. Many of the plants will produce either unmarketable heads or no heads at all.

There are two types of radicchio: "forcing" and "nonforcing." Nonforcing radicchio forms a head under normal growing conditions, whereas a forcing variety will form a head only after freezing weather. There are three ways to force radicchio to form a head: (1) cut the leaves off to within 1 inch of the crown 2 to 3 weeks before the first frost, and then dig the roots and store them in a burlap bag in a cool dark place (45° to 55°F) where they will produce a second growth of pale red heads; (2) leave the plants in the ground and cover them with straw

or another mulch; or (3) leave the plants in the ground and let the frost kill the outer green leaves. Upon peeling back the dead outer leaves, you will find the red head inside.

Radicchio may be a host for lettuce mosaic. In counties like Monterey that enforce a lettuce-free period for mosaic control, radicchio is also subject to this crop-free period.

Harvest and postharvest practices. The USDA storage recommendation is 32° to 34°F at 95 to 100% relative humidity, with an approximate storage life of 2 to 3 weeks.

Sources

Seed

Abundant Life Seed Foundation, P.O. Box 772, Port Townsend, WA 98368

Bountiful Gardens, 5798 Ridgewood Road, Willits, CA 95490

W. Atlee Burpee & Co., 300 Park Avenue, Warminster, PA 18974

California Gardeners Seed Co., 904 Silver Spur Road, Suite 414, Rolling Hills Estates, CA 90274

Comstock, Ferre & Co., 263 Main Street, Wethersfield, CT 06109

The Cook's Garden, P.O. Box 65, Londonderry, VT 05148

Gleckler's Seedsmen, Metamora, OH 43540

Heirloom Garden Seeds, P.O. Box 138, Guerneville, CA 95446

Johnny's Selected Seeds, 299 Foss Hill Road, Albion, ME 04910

Le Champion Heritage Seeds, P.O. Box 1602, Freedom, CA 95019

Le Jardin du Gourmet, P.O. Box 75, St. Johnsbury Center, VT 05863

Nichols Garden Nursery, 1190 North Pacific Highway, Albany, OR 97321

Park Seed Co., Cokesbury Road, Greenwood, SC 29647-0001

Pinetree Garden Seeds, Route 100, New Gloucester, ME 04260

Redwood City Seed Co., P.O. Box 361, Redwood City, CA 94064

Seeds Blüm, Idaho City Stage, Boise, ID 83706

Shepherd's Garden Seeds, 30 Irene Street, Torrington, CT 06790

Taylor's Herb Gardens, 1525 Lone Oak Road, Vista, CA 92084

Thompson & Morgan, P.O. Box 1308, Jackson, NJ 08527

Vermont Bean Seed Co., Garden Lane, Fair Haven, VT 05743

More information

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Kline, Roger. 1987. Special vegetables. *Country Journal*, April 1987.

Larkcom, Joy. 1986. Radicchio. *Gardening Magazine*. April 1986.

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Stephens, James. *Minor vegetables*. 1988. Cooperative Extension Bulletin SP-40, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL.

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USDA. 1987. *Tropical products transport handbook*. Agric. Handb. 668. USDA, Washington, DC.