



Stem Lettuce from Taiwan – Ruth



Description of area

Taiwan is a mountainous island in the tropics, so has warm winters and hot, wet stormy summers. Farms are small, usually run by single families but many people live in the capital and have little or no room to grow food.

Background to Ruth

Ruth left Taiwan when she was only six. Her family lived in a block of apartments built around a central courtyard, and had very little growing space, but she remembers they grew luffas once.

"The whole thing was immense... loads and loads of fruits drooping down from the vine and it's delicious... they are really fresh and lovely"

Crops grown in the region

Crops grown for sale include rice, soya beans, tea, sweet potatoes, pineapples and citrus fruits. Most farming families grow food for themselves such as luffas, chillies, garlic, stem lettuce, mustards and other Oriental brassicas as well as many different sorts of bean.

"I use the stem, pickle them and it tastes better than any vegetable during that season... You have to peel the hard skin... then slice it thinly... use the best soy sauce you can get and some people sprinkle a little sugar"

Growing Stem Lettuce

Stem lettuce or 'celtuce' is grown for its thick stems. It has a mild flavour and is thinly sliced then stir fried.

"I sow it in October... because I'd never grown it before... I didn't have time to harvest and they just grow on and on so I harvest in February... there was stems so big and juicy... The harvest is really great and we enjoy that and I share with other people"



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Growing and using Stem Lettuce in the UK

Stem lettuce can be grown in the same way as ordinary lettuce, but the plants need spacing much wider apart – 60cm between plants and 1m between rows. They need a fertile soil in full sun with ample moisture in dry weather. Because they need so much room it's easier to start plants off in modules and plant out once they've got at least four true leaves.

How to grow

Crop details: Hardy annual: seed, Time to harvest: 2 -4 months after sowing, Grow with lettuces in rotation. Size: medium

Growing timeline: Sow indoors March-April, outdoors April-September. (Plant out as soon as large enough.) Harvest late July until hard frosts - in mild winters can still be eaten in February.



Sow

Plant indoors in large-celled module trays in March to early April, or thinly in open ground once the soil has warmed up. Transplant to a sunny, sheltered site with good drainage and fertile soil as soon as plants have four or five true leaves. Space plants 60m/2ft apart.

Grow

Plants will benefit from application of well-rotted garden compost before the growing season starts, but then require little other care apart from keeping them free of weeds and watering in dry weather. Some people remove the lower leaves to encourage extra-long stems.

Harvest

Cut the stems when large enough – usually at least 5cm/2in across but before the plant produces flowerbuds. The small tuft of leaves at the top of the stem called a 'palm' or 'cabbage' tastes bitter but is highly prized in some cultures, being stir-fried with garlic and vinegar. Other growers just discard it.

Cook

Lettuce stems can be eaten pickled or as a fresh vegetable. They taste nutty and crunchy. Peel off the tough outer skin before use. If stir frying as a fresh vegetable, slice thinly and toss in a pan with sesame oil and grated ginger or garlic either on their own or as an accompaniment to prawns or chicken.

