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W. H. Kooyman

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The Cultivation of Lettuce

By W. H. KOOYMAN, Vegetable Instructor, Horticultural Division

LETTUCE is one of the most popular salad vegetables and is widely grown in Australia. In Western Australia most of the lettuce is grown during spring, summer and autumn on the sandy soils of the metropolitan area. A small portion is grown during winter. In recent years the cultivation of lettuce has been difficult in many of the gardens of the metropolitan area and the question "Could you tell me what is wrong with my lettuce?" has been asked on many occasions.

As cultivation of lettuce is of importance to the grower as well as to the public, I would like to discuss some aspects of cultivation of this vegetable. Because lettuce is a cool weather plant it generally does well under relatively cool conditions with a maximum of sunshine. Temperature and soil moisture are important in the successful production of lettuce. Preparation of the soil for planting and growing is much the same as for growing other vegetables, and a thorough cultivation will do much to assure a good stand of plants, and reduce labour after the crop is planted. At this time of the year, the bulk of the lettuce is planted direct, while later in the season many growers raise the young plants in seed beds. The seed is often planted by hand, but a small proportion of the commercial growers use mechanical seed-drills.

After the seed is planted it is necessary to keep the moisture content of the soil at a high level, and several irrigations may be necessary—the frequency of the irrigations depending on temperature and general conditions of the soil. Light dressings of well-rotted organic manure are often applied on the seed beds, as this may help to maintain the moisture; it also serves to keep the soil cool during hot weather.

The seeds usually germinate in four to five days after planting and the seedlings emerge soon after. It is a good practice to give the young plants a light dressing of blood and bone when they are one week old.

It must be borne in mind that the right type of any particular variety should be

planted for each season. An out-of-season variety may result in seed-stalk formation, or the plants may remain bushy and form soft, puffy heads.

Thinning-out is a much more important operation than many growers realise. It is at this stage that a grower decides which plants are going to become his crop. It is essential that only the healthy plants remain in the field, as many of the dwarfed and stunted seedlings may be infected with diseases such as "lettuce mosaic" and "big vein." The experienced grower will do the thinning-out in two stages. The first operation takes place at an early stage, the plants being spaced at a distance of two to three inches in the row. The final operation takes place ten days later. The plants are then four to five inches high, and well-developed. At this stage, any seedlings affected by disease may be easily recognised and dealt with accordingly. Care should be exercised not to leave the plants too close together, as over-crowding may delay maturity, and cause only small heads to be formed.

Fertilisation is important in the cultivation of lettuce since it is a quick-developing crop. Fertiliser should be applied as side dressings in small quantities at frequent intervals, as high soil fertility levels must be maintained for good lettuce production. Lettuce requires constant moisture from planting to harvest. A wide fluctuation of soil moisture is undesirable at any time, and may cause damage to the crop in the later stages of development.

When irrigation water is applied from a sprinkler system during warm weather it is recommended that the first watering should be applied during the morning before the plants reach wilting point. Losses from "tipburn" and "slime" may result from careless irrigation of nearly-mature lettuce crops. Heavy applications of water during the hottest hours of the day are undesirable and frequent waterings of short duration are to be preferred.

Over-irrigation is quite as harmful as an insufficient water supply, and may favour the development of fungus diseases in the crop. Careful attention to irrigation will save fertilisers, and ensure that the

crop receives no setback due to shortage of plant foods.

Lettuce should not be grown frequently on the same land, and some system of crop rotation should be followed. Crop rotation is important because it tends to reduce soil-borne agents which may be the cause of serious disorders in the crop. Plants differ in their feeding habits, in that they remove various elements from the soil in different amounts.

There are well over 1,000 varieties of lettuce, but in Western Australia the most popular is Great Lakes. This variety is able to produce marketable heads under adverse climatic conditions, and is favoured by most growers.



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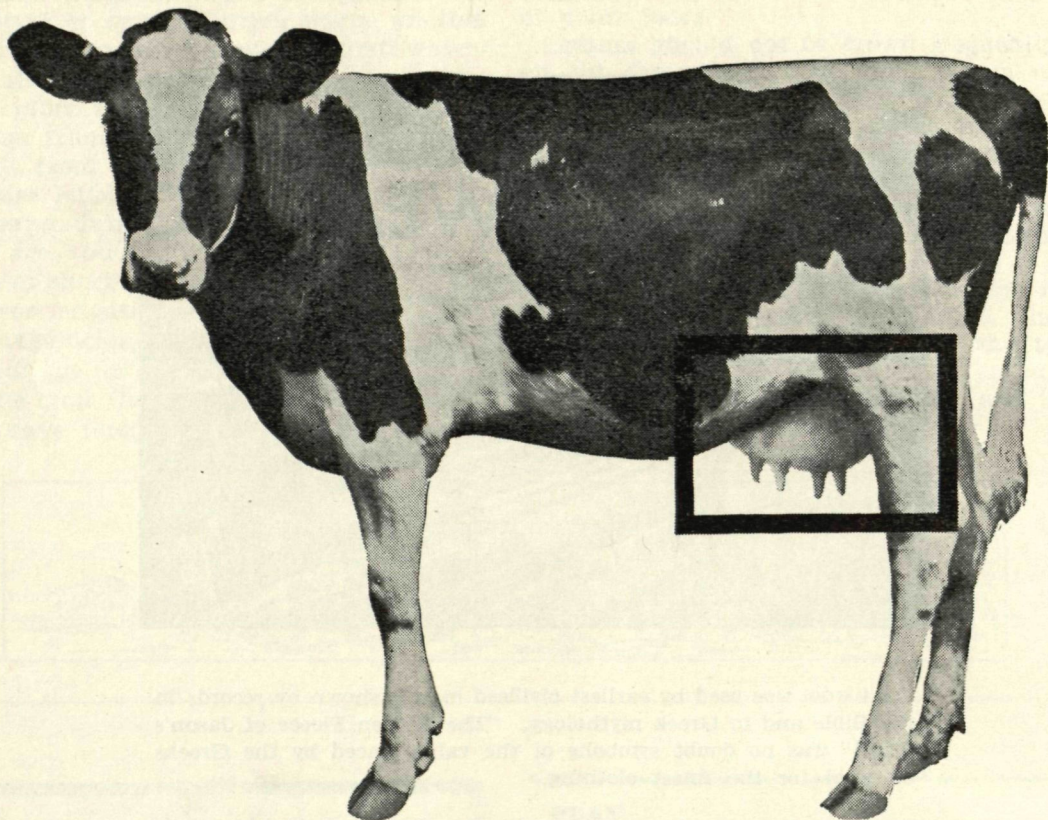
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