Lettuce and Onion in Containers

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It is a great time of the year to grow flowers in containers and the garden but have you thought about vegetables, specifically lettuce and onions? Both are easy to grow, productive and attractive.

I like a half whiskey barrel but any container larger than about 12 inches in diameter will make a nice display and produce vegetables for the table.

Leaf lettuce transplants are available in 3 or 4 different colors at area nurseries. Use a row of the mixed colors in a border around the edge of the container and then plant the onions in the middle. The larger the container the more onion plants that can be planted in the center of the container.

A half whiskey barrel with 8 lettuce plants around the edge could probably handle about 30 onions spread over the middle of the container. The 12 inch container may support 2 lettuce plants and 8 onions.

Lettuce can be planted by seed if you can wait for the plants to mature. Remember the seed must not be covered with soil. It only germinates if it is on the soil surface.

Onion transplants are available in bundles at area nurseries. One bundle may include about 90 plants, enough for 2 8ft. rows if they are planted 2 inches apart. It works well to share the plants in the bundle with neighbors or to plant one row in the garden and then plant the rest in containers.

Fill your container with a high quality potting mix. In addition to the potting mix all containers will require drainage holes so that water does not puddle in the pot.

Both lettuce and onions require heavy fertilization to provide a good yield. Prepare the soil in the garden with 4 cups of slow release or winterizer lawn fertilizer per 100 sq. ft. of bed. In the container use Osmocote or a similar slow release product especially for containers for the initial nutrient application.

To maintain the required high level of nutrients the onions in the garden can be sidedressed with more of the lawn fertilizer every 3 weeks. In the container you have the option of adding more Osmocote every 3 weeks or you can fertilize every week when you water with a soluble fertilizer like Miracle-Gro or Peters.

The onions will eventually produce bulbs 3 to 4 inches across if they have the room so not only is it desirable to harvest green onions as the season progresses, it is necessary if you want the final onions to reach full size.

The lettuce can be harvested leaf by leaf as you need it for salads and garnishes, or you can harvest the whole top 2 or 3 times during the season. When I harvest lettuce (or spinach and other greens) leaf by leaf, I always leave over one-half of the foliage in place. Treated in this manner a highly fertilized lettuce plant will remain productive and attractive through to June.

If you have children or grandchildren it is great fun to build on the idea of container gardening. Each young person could have their own container and make some independent decisions about the plants in their garden. In addition to the 4 types of leaf lettuce there are 3 different colors of high quality short day onions available at most nurseries. The young gardeners could even include carrots, beets, or bright lights chard in their container planting. All are easy to grow and attractive.