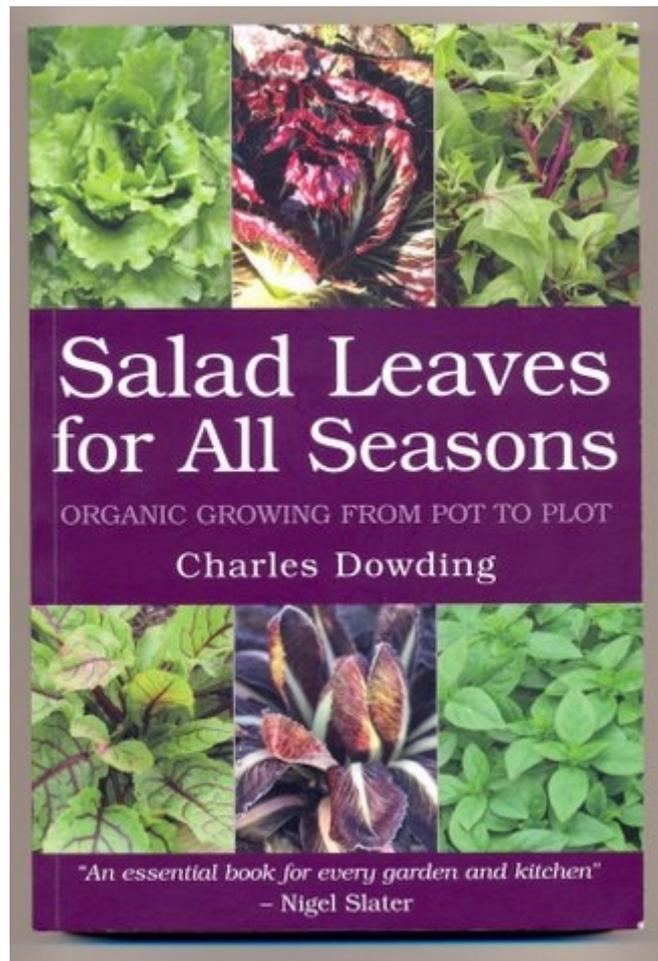


## **BOOK REVIEW – “Salad Leaves for All Seasons”, by Charles Dowding**

Published in 2008 by Green Books Ltd, Foxhole, Dartington, Totnes, Devon TQ9 6EB. 200 pages plus 32 pages of colour photographs. £10.95. ISBN 978 1 900322 20 1.



The author has been growing and selling salads for over 25 years. So here is a book which comes from a master of the art, full of trade secrets, full of advice for professionals and amateurs alike. The book deserves to be the standard reference book on the subject.

But how can it be that there is a 200-page book devoted just to salads? Let me explain. When I was young “salad” meant a few leaves of lettuce with no dressing. Now, there is a multitude of different tastes, combining on your plate to give a most interesting and delightful experience. I like Charles’ phrase “a palette of flavours”. I grow most of the salads covered in the book. Like Charles I am completely organic and no-dig, and am thus able like Charles to produce the most wonderful and varied tastes. I therefore took great delight in reading this book since I have a great interest in the topic. I looked for confirmation on what I have been doing. I looked for new salads and better ways of growing them – and found plenty.

The title of the book includes the words “All Seasons”. Yes, Charles grows salads in winter, sometimes in the open, sometimes in greenhouses and sometimes in polytunnels. He manages to supply his regular customers in winter, even though the size of the crop is somewhat reduced. Regarding seasons generally, he explains the importance of working with Nature – growing what will grow in a particular season rather than attempting to force plants to grow out of season. Therefore his customers have changes in the salad mix as the year advances, and I feel sure they appreciate the variety.

It is surprising how little space the amateur needs in order to grow adequate quantities of salads for a family of four. Charles gives a worked example of two raised beds, each 4 feet by 8 feet, cropping

from 14 April to 20 December. He harvested 71.2 Kg of salad leaves, equating to 470 salad packs of 150 grams. Now that would feed a few families and still leave enough over for many pet rabbits! So, armed with this book you would be able to grow adequate amounts of salad leaves all year round from a really tiny part of your garden. But the main thing is, by following Charles' methods you would produce salads of the most exquisite tastes, textures and colours. The no-dig method enables the mycorrhizal fungi in the soil to donate to the plants trace elements in the soil which are essential for our health. I am convinced that the exquisite tastes come from the presence of the trace elements. So, away with bland supermarket salads – grow your own and live!

The first half of the book explains how to grow salad leaves and describes what grows in which season. The second half is a reference book on about 150 individual salad types, plus chapters on sowing indoors and on winter salads. Tables of what to grow in which season are given, and the best time to sow (to avoid growing in seasons when a particular salad's predatory insects abound).

He gives extensive coverage on how to combat the principal enemy – the slug. His main answer, since slugs are nocturnal, is to go out in the dark with a torch to find and dispose of the horrible monsters. He has 1.5 acres of his own land for growing all kinds of vegetables, including salads. My main growing area is my allotment and if I followed his advice I feel sure some well-meaning member of the public would report "suspicious activity on the allotments" and the local police might not accept my explanation "I was just killing slugs officer". No, I have to use slug pellets, but I take care to use them only under fleece to reduce the risk of birds eating poisoned slugs. I am now using the new "organic" slug pellets based upon ferrous phosphate rather than metaldehyde. Charles' supplementary method of combating the slug is to be meticulously clean, removing all old and decaying leaves from the salad plants and setting out the plants some distance from each other so that the slugs cannot hide under overlapping foliage.

Regarding cropping, he advocates taking outer leaves off the salad plants progressively throughout the season. This ensures that the crop of leaves is just right, the cropping season is greatly extended and the amount of crop per plant is much higher than would be the case if the plant were allowed to grow to maturity and form a heart. Pulling leaves off lettuces also brings forward cropping by a month.

I could not fault his advice on the growing of individual salads. Where I do differ is on soil preparation. We are both no-dig. Charles spreads compost from the local council's "green recycling" programme about 2 inches deep on the surface of the soil prior to planting out young plants. That does not appeal to me since I would be worried about what was in the compost. I spread well-rotted farmyard (ie cow) manure. I have to say the cows, like most farm animals, are fed on genetically-modified soya as part of their diet – but am assured that the genetically-modified aspects are transformed and eradicated in the cow's gut. Charles raises his young plants in modules in the greenhouse. I prefer raising them in modules in the airing cupboard to give them a kick-start.

Charles' wife Susie has contributed an excellent chapter on recipes for salad meals. In addition to the 200 pages of text there are 32 pages of excellent colour photographs taken by Charles – they help the reader by portraying the host of unusual salading plants which may be new to many people, such as rocket, coriander confetti, ruby chard, mustard, pak choi, radicchio, lamb's lettuce, purslane, amaranth, chervil, sorrel, fennel, heartsease, nasturtium, land cress, endive, chicory, orache, spinach, okahijiki, komatsuna, mibuna, mizuna, leaf radish, chicons, tatsoi, lavatera and marigold. There is an excellent aid for the reader – an executive summary at the start of each chapter. The spelling, grammar and proof-reading are superb. There is a good index and list of suppliers.

He gives an enormous number of tips, many of which were new to me, such as: add volcanic rock dust (for essential trace elements), comfrey and lucerne pellets to container compost between crops to avoid changing the compost; never wash nor sterilise plastic containers when re-filling; water in the morning, not the evening, as an anti-slug measure; avoid terracotta pots (evaporation results in a need for more-frequent watering); don't use nematodes – they are not very effective against slugs; avoid

growing basil outdoors; avoid using parsley seed which is over 2 years old; purchase watercress and put it in water or damp soil where it should root and grow again; try garlic chive flowers and coriander flowers which have wonderful flavours. That is just a selection of tips from a master gardener who, in this book, tells us what he has found which works. He is not at all afraid of going against received wisdom and his advice is the more valuable for that. As an example, he says that times for sowing on packets of seed are too optimistic and misleading – he provides an invaluable sowing table. So, buy the book, grow salads the Charles Dowding way, and live happily ever after!

MIKE MASON