A salad is only as good as the quality of its ingredients, and to make a truly great salad you’ve got to use ingredients that are fresh, ripe and in season. Websites like www.eattheseasons.co.uk will tell you which fruit and vegetables are at their best right now.

If you think the world of salad is limited to watery lettuce and a few chopped tomatoes and cucumbers, think again. There are an endless amount of wonderful combinations and you can make a salad as simple or as complex as you like. Spend a minute thinking about the contrasts of tastes and textures in the ingredients you are choosing and what sort of dressing you want to use so you end up with something delicious and exciting every time.

**THE BASE OF YOUR SALAD**
The ingredient that forms the bulk of your salad is the base. And when we hear the word ‘salad’, lettuce is often the first ingredient that comes to mind because it is used as a base for so many salads. The most common type of lettuce in the UK is the round lettuce, with its small crunchy core and floppy leaves. Iceberg lettuce is another popular variety. It is crunchy, quite watery and has a very mild flavour. Oakleaf, cos or romaine lettuce, and little gem lettuces, also make great salad bases, as do chicory, radicchio, rocket, watercress, baby spinach, tiny red-veined chard leaves, mustard leaves, pea shoots and sorrel.

*For lots of great information on salad leaves, check out:* www.britishleafysalads.co.uk

But plenty of salads don’t have any lettuce in them at all. You can make beautiful salads using cooked new potatoes, couscous, lentils, shredded cabbages or any other robust interesting vegetable. Use your imagination and you’ll never be bored.

**PREPARING AND WASHING SALAD LEAVES**
Wash your salad leaves before using them. Make sure your sink is clean then fill it with cold water. Gently wash the salad leaves in the water until they are clean, and then transfer them to a salad spinner and spin dry. If you don’t have a salad spinner, put them into a clean tea towel, gather the edges up, then nip outside and spin it around your head. Make sure they’re properly dry – if they aren’t, the salad dressing won’t cling to them. Keep them in a fridge or bowl under a damp cloth until you’re ready to use them.
WHAT ELSE CAN YOU ADD TO A SALAD?
Raw crunchy veggies, like carrots or radishes, are great in salads. But they can be quite hard if they’re in big pieces, so slice them finely or shave them into ribbons with a speed peeler. Raw beetroots, spring onions, cucumber, courgettes and celery all work well like this.

Cooked vegetables are also fantastic in salads. Peas, broad beans, asparagus and corn, cooked very quickly so they are tender, add flavour and colour. Grilled slices of courgette or pepper, or even chunks of sticky roasted squash or pumpkin also make salads much more interesting.

Tearing in soft herbs at the last minute adds loads of extra flavour. Basil, coriander, parsley, dill, mint or even thyme or marjoram tips are all great choices.

It’s also nice to add a bit of protein to a salad, especially if you’re having it as a main meal. Use your imagination; there are really no limits to what you can include. Try a few slices of smoked salmon, shredded roast chicken, cooked prawns, hard-boiled eggs, buffalo mozzarella, crispy bacon, cannellini beans, lentils or crumbled goats’ cheese.

For a bit of crunch, try adding a few nuts or seeds. Toasted or flaked almonds, pumpkin seeds, pine nuts, crumbled walnuts and chopped cashews all work well.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE DRESSING
Jamie says, “In my opinion, a good salad dressing is the key to making a salad absolutely delicious, meaning you want to eat it rather than feel you have to. Another great thing about dressings is that they help us get the most from the salad: the oil and the acid in the dressing actually help our body absorb far more of the nutrients from the vegetables.”

Think of your salad dressing as the link that brings all the ingredients in your salad together. There are loads of ready-made bottled dressings available in the shops, but it’s so easy to make your own so try and get into the habit of doing that rather than buying them. Shop-bought dressings are likely to contain lots of hidden ingredients and may be high in calories. Plus if you make your own, you can tweak it every time to suit the other ingredients in your salad.
**JAM JAR DRESSINGS**
The easiest way to make your salad dressing is in a clean jam jar. Just add all of your ingredients, pop the lid on and give it a good shake!

Most salad dressings contain an oil element – such as extra virgin olive oil, groundnut oil or sesame oil – and an acid element, such as balsamic vinegar, red wine vinegar, or lemon or lime juice. Aim for a ratio of 3 parts oil to 1 part acid then add any other ingredients you fancy. Half a teaspoon of Dijon mustard or some finely chopped fresh herbs or chilli can add loads of beautiful flavour. If you want a slightly creamy dressing, try stirring a spoonful of natural yoghurt into the dressing.

**DRESSING YOUR SALAD**
Once dressed, salad leaves can wilt after a few minutes, so always add your dressing right before serving. If you want to ensure a really good even coating, using clean hands, quickly toss everything together. Just make sure you don’t add all of the dressing at once; add a little, mix it up then have a taste before deciding whether you need to add more. You can always add more, but you can’t take it away.