



## My melanoma battle

One woman's struggle to beat cancer that kills 2,000 a year

Pages 26-27



**EAT SHOOTS AND PEAS:** Pea-shoots are among those leaves packed with goodness

## Why baby leaves will always give you the best salad days

If you spend your lunch hour chomping your way through salad in the hope of a health boost, you may not be getting the goodness you want – unless you choose your leaves carefully, writes Barney Calman.

Food scientist Steve Rothwell ([www.stevesleaves.co.uk](http://www.stevesleaves.co.uk)), who has a PhD in the health benefits of watercress, explains that the most beneficial salads contain baby leaves – young plants that have not grown to full maturity.

'Leaves in general are nutritious because they contain a range of vitamins, minerals and phytochemicals [natural plant compounds] including carotenoids that help plants catch light and convert it to energy,' he says.

Beta carotene is a source of Vitamin A, for healthy skin and vision, and the carotenoids lutein and zeaxanthin are important for eye health. But it's the leaves exposed to light that contain the highest amounts of these beneficial compounds.

'If you take an adult iceberg lettuce, for instance, the outer leaves are exposed to light,' says Rothwell. 'But these are often discarded in favour of the pale, tender – yet less nutritious – inner leaves. Juvenile plants usually consist of a few loosely gathered leaves which all get exposed to the sun. This is why baby plants are better for you.'

So what should we be filling our plates with? Number one on the list is surely the pea-shoot – the curly leaves of the immature garden pea vine.

Gram for gram, these unassuming plants contain seven times more Vitamin C than oranges – which has a role in the formation of blood vessels, tendons, ligaments and bone, helps the absorption of iron from food, supports the immune system and is an antioxidant, which some studies have claimed could protect against cancer.

Curiously, they taste much like the actual pea itself – and contain four times more Vitamin A than

tomatoes. They are also a rich source of folic acid, one of the B vitamins, which helps produce healthy cells and blood and is also essential during pregnancy.

Spinach has long been recognised as a highly nutritious food, rich in folic acid and Vitamins A, C and K, which enables blood to clot and helps build and maintain strong bones. The leaves are also a source of iron, Vitamin E, magnesium, potassium and calcium.

'But adult spinach is tougher, more bitter and needs to be cooked,' explains Rothwell. 'Heating can diminish the nutritional values, which is where baby spinach comes in. These leaves are tender and sweet enough to be eaten raw.'

And baby lettuce comes in a variety of forms. 'All types of lettuce provide useful amounts of Vitamins A, C and K, along with phenolic antioxidants,' explains Rothwell.

'Different colours and varieties have specific and in some cases unique benefits. For instance, lollo rosso and red cos provide the powerful antioxidant anthocyanin, which some studies suggest could protect heart health.'

'Lambs lettuce is a source of omega-3 fat and romaine is high in Vitamin A and lutein.'

One phytochemical known as PEITC gives 'spicy' vegetables, such as watercress, rocket and baby leaf curly kale, a distinctive peppery taste.

A large body of research has shown that they have a range of cell-protecting and anti-cancer benefits, including support of the immune system. Baby watercress is perhaps the best source.

'Apples, broccoli and tomatoes are often cited as the "super" fruit and vegetables but, weight for weight, watercress is a better source of Vitamins C, B, K and E, iron, calcium, magnesium, manganese and zinc,' says Rothwell.

'And, incredibly, watercress also has more calcium than milk.'