Salad of the Imagination

Fresh from the garden: chives, garlic, zucchini
Recipe Source: Stephanie Alexander’s Kitchen Garden Cooking with Kids (Penguin Lantern 2006)

Students love making ‘Salad of the imagination’ and there are so many possible combinations. Many of the extra ingredients listed here are heavier than the salad leaves, which means the extras will tend to sink to the bottom of the bowl. For that reason, it is often better to serve these kinds of salads on a wide shallow platter, then everyone can see the special touches. Always add the dressing and toss the salad well, just before serving.

Suggestions by season:
- Spring: herbs (such as flowering thyme), pine nuts, rocket leaves (arugula)
- Summer: tomatoes, mozzarella, basil, spinach, rocket leaves (arugula)
- Autumn: celery, gruyère, parsnip chips
- Winter: spinach, croutons, bacon, beetroot

What to do:
- Assemble your ingredients, thinking about what is in season, which flavours go together and how they will feel in a salad (for example, it’s always nice to have something crunchy along with the soft green leaves).

To prepare the salad leaves and herbs:
- Fill a large bowl with cold water and tip all the salad leaves and large herbs into the bowl to soak for a few minutes.
- Lift the leaves onto the draining board of the sink. Tip the water into a bucket to be used on the garden.
- Rinse the bowl, then add fresh water and return the leaves to the bowl. Swish the leaves again in clean water, then lift out small handfuls at a time and place them in the salad spinner.
- Put any yellow or slimy leaves in the compost bucket. Pluck any herbs from tough stems and discard the stems.
- Tear any very large leaves into smaller pieces. Working in batches, very gently dry the leaves in the salad spinner. (Reserve any more water that can be used for the garden.)
- Spread out a dry tea towel, and line it with a long piece of kitchen paper. Tip the dried leaves onto the paper and roll up gently into a parcel in the tea towel.
- Keep the rolled parcel of leaves in the refrigerator until needed. Rinse and dry the bowl.

To make the dressing:
- To make a dressing, the most common formula is 1 part acid (such as lemon juice or vinegar) to 4 parts oil. (High-quality vinegars are very powerful, so you may need to use less.)
- Combine your acid with your oil in a small bowl. Whisk lightly to combine.
- Whisk in additional seasonings, which could include mustard, small amounts of honey or sugar, freshly chopped herbs (such as parsley, tarragon, chervil or mint), toasted spices (such as coriander seeds or cumin seeds), yoghurt.
- Whatever combination you choose, always season to taste with salt and freshly ground black pepper.
- Taste the dressing and adjust the flavours as necessary before using.

To assemble the salad:
- Prepare any other ingredients for your salad, such as croutons or toasted seeds, cheeses, preserves, grated vegetables or hard-boiled eggs.
- Unwrap the parcel of salad leaves and tip them into the bowl with the dressing, then very gently turn them in the dressing with tongs or your hands.
- Serve on platters and scatter with croutons or edible flower garnishes, if using.