



Cabbage (See related article on brassicas for information on broccoli and cauliflower)

© Annette McFarlane

Could there be any greater dinner party faux pas than serving boiled cabbage to guests? One even suspects that processed coleslaw products are chopped into confetti sized pieces and drowned in dressing to make the base ingredient indiscernible to unsuspecting consumers. But cabbage need not necessarily be the boring, gas inducing vegetable we remember from our childhood! In fact, many of the cabbage varieties available today go unrecognised as members of the brassica family.

FACT FILE:

Botanical Name: *Brassica oleracea var. capitata*

Family: *Brassicaceae*

Climatic Range: *Traditional European varieties of cabbage grow best in cooler climates as plants generally require cold conditions to initiate the formation of heads. Mature plants are frost tolerant. Cabbages rarely form heads in tropical climates, but some dedicated gardeners still grow them during the dry season for their leaf harvest. The many forms of Chinese cabbage are more suitable for tropical and subtropical regions.*

Planting and Harvest: *Most cabbages grow best during late autumn, winter and early spring, but with careful selection of varieties it is possible to grow and harvest cabbage all year round in cooler regions. In subtropical climates planting is restricted to late autumn and early winter. Plants can be established as seeds or seedlings and when well-grown will mature in 14-18 weeks. For a progressive harvest establish 4 – 6 seedlings every six weeks.*

The European Tradition

The traditional European cabbage is a biennial plant that forms a large, dense, central head of overlapping leaves. Some cabbages are rounded (*ballhead*), while others are flat on top (*drumhead*). Those that form pointed heads are typically quicker maturing and known as spring or oxheart types.



Red cabbage varieties are just as easy to grow as green types, but look a lot more decorative. Let them escape the confines of the vegetable garden and you will be amazed at the striking feature they create in the garden.

One problem with traditional varieties is their size. A single harvest of a 3-4 kilogram cabbage head is certainly impressive, but it can seem to take an eternity to eat your way through the harvest. While cabbages are long keeping, varieties that form smaller heads in a shorter period of time are more likely to find favour with gardener's today.

Open Hearted

Growing open hearted collards or kale (*Brassica oleracea var. acephala*) is becoming increasingly popular with modern gardeners. These non-heading plants produce smooth (collards) or frilly leaves (kale) that can be progressively harvested from plants. Culinary varieties tend to have foliage that is blue/green in colour. Ornamental varieties that have attractive purple, white or light green leaves are edible, but generally considered inferior in taste. Kale and collards are more heat tolerant than other headed cabbages.

Oriental Appeal

Chinese or Peking cabbage (*Brassica chinensis*) also known as wong bok, produces mature heads within 7 – 10 weeks. Plants can also be progressively harvested simply by removing individual leaves as required. They are regarded as somewhat easier to grow due to their tolerance of a wider range of soil and climatic conditions, but can bolt to seed prematurely in extreme cold.

There is a huge diversity of other types of Chinese cabbage including varieties of pak choi (Chinese white cabbage) and tsoi sum (flowering white cabbage). So different in appearance and taste are these brassicas, that many people fail to recognise them as cabbage relatives.



Growing them will appeal to many gardeners as a harvest can be achieved in as little as three weeks with some varieties.

Hot Stuff

Mustard leaf cabbage (*Brassica juncea*) or kaai tsoi is a non-heading plant that bears large leaves that are somewhat lettuce-like in appearance. However, you cannot confuse or compare the taste with either lettuce or cabbage as the leaves are extremely hot. Add them to salads or cook them as spinach. Entire plants will be ready for harvesting in less than six weeks. Alternatively, you can harvest individual leaves over several months.

Grow Your Own

Seeds of European cabbages may be sown direct into well-prepared beds or established in seed trays before being transplanted into gardens. Germination takes up to 10-12 days for European cabbages with cooler temperatures preferable for a good seed strike. Ensure that the taproot of transplanted seedlings is established into deep planting holes. Plants with bent or twisted roots will tend to topple over under the weight of the developing foliage. Plants are traditionally spaced at 60-75cm intervals, but where seedlings are plentiful try planting them close together. Thin the seedlings over the next six to eight weeks by harvesting them as non-headed greens.

Chinese varieties of cabbage germinate quickly and are best sown directly into the beds in which they will grow to maturity. Plants can be harvested at any stage, but the younger the harvest, the sweeter the taste.

Asian Experiment

Interested in Asian greens? Visit your local Asian food grocer and pick up a variety of seed packets. You may not be able to read the label, but the pictures on the front will give you some idea of the nature of the vegetable. Experiment with different types by sowing the seed directly into prepared gardens and harvesting the plants when young. You will be amazed at the diversity you can grow yourself that is otherwise unavailable as fresh green vegetables.

Crop Rotation

All cabbages are hungry feeders. Ideally they should be planted following a green manure crop or at least be grown in soil into which plenty of well-decomposed manure has been incorporated. A soil pH of 6.5-7.5 is preferred and ample soil moisture encourages rapid leaf production.

When growing European cabbages, part way through the growing season you should hill up around the stems with a mixture of compost and soil. This will help to support and prevent plants from falling over. In cold climates cutting cabbage heads low down on the stem of the plant when harvesting encourages the development of smaller secondary heads.

Pest Potential

All members of the brassica family are a magnet to caterpillars. Gardeners in warm climates will have fewer pest problems if plants are only established during the onset of the cooler months. Rotenone dust, repellent molasses and chilli sprays or hand picking of grubs are control options. Is Rotenone Safe?

Molasses Spray

Organic growers can control chewing insects with regular use of a home-made molasses spray. Simply dissolve one tablespoon of organic molasses into one litre of warm water. Add one teaspoon of Sunlight dishwashing liquid or other pure soap to help the mix stick to the leaves. Spray undiluted over the foliage of plants for grub free growth. This mix works a treat against the larvae of cabbage white butterflies on all brassica plants.

Seed Saving Tips

European cabbages can take up to two years to flower and set seed in cold climates, but in mild climates they can flower and set seed in the first year. All members of the brassica family are notoriously promiscuous. Varieties of European cabbages will not only cross-pollinate



with one another, but also with broccoli, Brussels sprouts, kale, cauliflower and kohlrabi. To save seed, allow six or more cabbages to flower, but be sure to isolate them from any other members of the cabbage family that happen to be flowering at the same time. Simple cages covered in shade cloth are ideal for this purpose.

Chinese type cabbages will not cross-pollinate with European cabbages, but plants of the same species will cross-pollinate with one another. When it comes to Chinese cabbages, even botanical experts disagree on who is related to whom, so different types are best isolated from one another when saving seed to ensure seed purity.

Varieties:

- Puma* (F1 - Yates) This small cabbage grows to just 15cm in diameter making it a more manageable size for most families.
- Mini* (Diggers Seeds) This quick maturing variety produces heads weighing up to one kilogram.
- Savoy* A traditional large growing drumhead type with deeply wrinkled leaves (the term savoyed means wrinkled) that is tolerant of cold climates.
- Sugarloaf* A spring type cabbage that produces a pointed head that is quick maturing and cold tolerant.
- Henderson Succession* A traditional large growing drumhead type suitable for planting in spring and early summer.
- All Seasons* A large growing drumhead type suitable for planting in spring and early summer.
- Earliball* A heat tolerant, early ballhead type that produces small solid heads.
- Red Dutch* This red variety of cabbage produces medium sized heads.

What's in a Name?
 Having a hard time distinguishing your wong bok from your tsoi sum? Spare a thought for Asian gardeners and cooks who have to distinguish between over 200 different cultivars of Chinese cabbage that are currently cultivated in Asia.

Swedes and Turnips

Swedes and turnips have been dismissed as old fashioned by gardeners and cooks who favour trendy aubergines and Asian greens. But take a closer look at these much-maligned vegetables and you will find that they have a lot to offer.



They occupy very little space, are easy to grow, provide an extended harvest and can be used in anything from soups to salads. Unfortunately, they are also considered a fashion faux pas. Members of the younger generation have not eaten them and few baby boomers have ever grown them. It would seem that the culture of swedes and turnips relies on a small band of dedicated devotees.



Fact File

Botanical Name

The botanical distinction between swedes and turnips is a little unclear. Some authorities believe that turnips and swedes are varieties of the same vegetable. Historical records indicate that turnips appeared in cultivation much earlier, leading other experts to suggest that swedes (*Brassica napobrassica*) are a natural hybrid between a cabbage (*Brassica oleracea* var. *capitata*) and a turnip (*Brassica campestris* var. *rapa*)

Family: Brassicaceae

Origin: Central and southern Europe

Climatic Range: Swedes ideally suited to cool moist, frosty climates where they can be grown almost year round. In warmer regions they are best planted in autumn and harvested before summer. Turnips are better able to cope with warm conditions. They can be grown almost year round in cool, frost-free regions and may be grown in the tropics during the dry season.

Description: Swedes and turnips form a swollen root similar to a beetroot in the first growing season and produce flowers and fertile seeds in the second season in cool climates. Plants grown in subtropical and tropical regions rarely produce fertile seeds. The skin of swedes is yellow to purple and the flesh is typically yellow. Turnips have white skin and flesh, often with a purple crown. Varieties of both vegetables are also grown for their leaf harvest.

The Direct Approach

Like most root vegetables, swedes and turnips resent transplanting. Seed is best sown 1-2cm deep in well-prepared beds with rows spaced 30 - 45cm apart. Seeds germinate easily in 5-7 days. Seedlings should be thinned to 15-20cm between plants or at closer intervals if crops are to be harvested when young. Water regularly as the shallow roots dry out quickly. Mulching plants can help reduce weed competition and ensure that the soil remains moist. Water stressed crops tend to become woody. Sow seeds at regular intervals for a successive harvest.

Growing Your Own

Swedes and turnips require a moderately rich soil with a pH of between 6 and 7. Like all root crops, they will fork and develop hairy roots when grown in freshly manured soil, heavy clay or stony ground. They can be grown following a crop that has been well manured such as lettuce, but preferable not following another brassica vegetable. Lack of trace elements results in a tasteless, bitter harvest. Organic matter in the form of well-decomposed compost and old animal manure will provide good levels of trace elements, but seaweed sprays, rockdust or powdered trace elements may be required where the soil is less fertile.

Sweet Young Things

It can be argued the demise in popularity of swedes and turnips rests fairly and squarely with gardeners who leave them to mature in the garden for too long and cooks who's culinary adventures extend only to mashing them. Grow and consume these vegetables as sweet, tender babies and be prepared to experiment a little when cooking them.

Harvest your crop as soon it has matured to what you consider an acceptable size. Grown in this way swedes and turnips are great space savers that can be squeezed in between taller or slower maturing crops.

Most roots can be left to mature to the size of a beetroot without becoming woody. Leave them to grow to the size of a melon and they are likely to be fibrous and tough. Swedes and turnips keep for extended periods once harvested, but in cold climates swedes are also particularly long-keeping if left in the ground.

Salad turnips may be harvested like radishes as little as four weeks after sowing. They can even be pickled in vinegar and eaten in the same way as beetroot. Salad varieties are also commonly grated and eaten fresh.



Eat Your Greens

Swede and turnip tops can be harvested as spinach as soon as newly sown plants are large enough to sustain regular leaf removal. Light shade results in more tender foliage and reduced bitterness.

In very cold climates swedes can provide valuable spring greens at a time when a little variety is welcome. Simply leave a few swedes to mature from your crop planted in the previous autumn. Remove the old leaves when temperatures rise. Fresh, young foliage will be quickly produced as the plant draws on the stored nutrients accumulated in the root system.

Growing swedes in this way is a great option for gardeners restricted to patio and balcony gardens. While the roots of these plants become fibrous and unsuitable for consumption, they will form flower spikes in late spring and may be used as a source of seed for next season's crop.

Chomp, Chomp

Chewing insects are a major pest of all brassica crops and swedes and turnips are no exception. Fortunately a small amount of leaf damage will not affect the size and quality of your harvest. Where caterpillars, grasshoppers and beetles get out of control, try molasses sprays, Derris dust, insecticide grade diatomaceous earth, chili or other organic sprays. Regular foliar applications of seaweed sprays will keep potential fungal disease under control and provide a valuable source of trace elements.

Playing the Field

Many varieties of swedes and turnips have been lost from cultivation due to their biennial growth habit and their promiscuity. Swedes and turnips generally require two growing seasons to produce their metre high flower stalk and successfully develop seeds. Plants are insect pollinated so physical barriers such as shade cloth covered cages are required to prevent accidental cross pollination not only between different varieties of swedes and turnips but also between them and other varieties of brassicas.

GE Threat

A further threat to these vegetables exists in the form of commercially grown Genetically Engineered brassica crops such as canola. Cross pollination between GE crops and other species of brassicas has already been recorded. All brassica species including non-hybrid, open pollinated and heirloom varieties of swedes and turnips face the threat of GE contamination.

Varieties of Swedes

Champion Purple Top - This variety is the most popular variety grown both commercially and by home gardens. It has the ability to reach a large size without becoming woody. It has a rich flavour and warm yellow coloured flesh. (Eden Seeds, Yates)

Hunters Butter - This heirloom variety has white flesh and white skin. Plants are best spaced further apart to accommodate its broad spreading foliage. (Eden Seeds)



Laings Garden – This selection produces fast maturing, medium sized roots. Once a popular home garden variety, it is now only available through seed saving and organic growing groups. (Seed Savers Network).

Laurentian - This variety has a rose/purple coloured crown and quality roots with a great flavour. (New Gippsland Seeds)



Yellow Bronze Top This variety is adapted to warm climates and has a yellow skin and flesh with a bronze crown. (Yates)

The Seed Savers Network at Byron Bay in NSW is keen to hear from gardeners who have saved seed from swede varieties dropped from commercial seed catalogues including *Laings Garden*, *Tipperary* and *Royal Rose*. Turnips varieties such as *Scot's Yellow*, *Kashmir Red*, *Orange Jelly*, *Cowhorn* and *Red Top Viarmes* are also being sought.

Varieties of Turnips

Hakurei – This recent introduction is eaten raw or grown for its green foliage. (Yates)

Japanese - Producing long white roots like a daikon radish, this variety can be eaten raw or cooked. The tops can also be consumed as a green vegetable. (Green Harvest, Eden Seeds)

Milan White-Red Top - The rounded root of this heirloom variety is white but develops a vivid red crown where roots emerge above the soil. (Kings Seeds)



Presto – This small, pure white open pollinated turnip is best harvested when young. (New Gippsland Seeds)

Purple Top White Globe - This variety is grown primarily for its root harvest. It is long keeping and slow to bolt to seed. (Kings Seeds, Green Patch, Eden Seeds, New Gippsland Seeds)

Red Round – The roots of this variety are slightly elongated and have red skin and white flesh. The foliage has attractive red veins and red stems. (Kings Seeds)

Scarlet Queen Hybrid - This sweet, red skinned variety has a mild flavour. (New Gippsland Seeds)

Snowball - Sometimes referred to as white egg turnips, this heirloom variety produces round, white roots. (Eden seeds)

Tokyo White Cross - This hybrid has smooth white, slightly elongated roots that are eaten raw like a radish. It is also grown for its foliage harvest. (Kings Seeds, Yates, Diggers Seeds, New Gippsland Seeds)