

Kohlrabi

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I have often thought it sad that some marketing guru has not taken pity on the unfortunately named kohlrabi or turnip rooted cabbage. If ever there was a vegetable in need of a marketing makeover, this species of brassica is surely a deserving case.

How about Gourmet Globe or Budda's Belly? If gardeners could be encouraged to think more positively about kohlrabi, they may discover the delights of growing one of the tastiest members of the cabbage family.

Fact File

Botanical Name: *Brassica oleracea var. gongyloides*

Family: Brassicaceae – the cabbage tribe

Climatic Range: Kohlrabi originated in Northern Europe, but is tolerant of a wide range of climate conditions and is now cultivated in tropical, subtropical and temperate regions of the world.

Planting Season: Seeds and seedling can be established in most areas during autumn and winter. Popular varieties include Early Purple, Purple Vienna and White Vienna.

Description

Botanically speaking, this vegetable is a stem, albeit rather a swollen one. Plants may be white, light green or purple with a bluish blush, depending on the variety being grown. The flesh inside is white and sweet, regardless of external colouration. The leaves, leaf stalks and stem of the vegetable are edible.

As plants develop, they tend to push themselves out of the ground, until the swollen stem sits on the surface of the soil in a manner similar to beetroot. Don't make the mistake of trying to hill up the soil around them or replant them more deeply. It is quite natural for the plants to look a little exposed.

Propagation



Plants grown from seed can be sown directly into prepared beds or established in punnets or trays for planting out later as seedlings. All major seed companies carry seed stocks, but seed saver networks and organic gardening groups may be a source of a greater range of varieties. You can generally also purchase seedlings from your nursery, but you may have to ask for them to be ordered in. Kohlrabi seedlings are rarely stocked in any quantity.

Growing and Harvesting Your Own

Like all brassica's, kohlrabi is a heavy feeder with a high demand for all major nutrients and some trace elements. Add plenty of rich compost or dig in a green manure before planting. Neutral to slightly alkaline soils are preferred, so dust the soil with dolomite lime or a little wood ash saved from last year's winter fire if your soil is acidic.

If you have never grown kohlrabi before start with just a few plants, say six per adult member of the household. Remember that plants do not take up nearly as much space as a cabbage or cauliflower and can be planted just 15 - 20cm apart and between rows.

Well nourished plants develop stems 5-10cm in diameter in around 10 weeks. Avoid allowing plants to become too big or the stems may become woody. Leaves and leaf stalks can be harvested at any stage, but keep in mind that continually defoliating plants will slow development of the stem.

Potential problems:

Kohlrabi suffers from all the same chewing pests as cabbages, cauliflower and broccoli. Fortunately, if you are growing your kohlrabi for the stem rather than the foliage, a few chewed leaves are of little consequence. If chewing pests get out of control try this simple organic molasses spray.

Simply dissolve one tablespoon of molasses in a litre of warm water. Add one teaspoon of liquid soap (Sunlight dish washing liquid is ideal) to help the mixture stick. Spray this regularly over the leaves of all plants attacked by caterpillars and other chewing pests. Caterpillars would rather starve than eat leaves sprayed with this mixture. Other pest control options include sprinkling with Derris dust or using repellent chilli or garlic sprays.

If plants do not appear to be growing rapidly, check that the soil pH is neutral to slightly alkaline. If the pH does not need adjusting your plants may just be hungry. Apply some well-decomposed manure around the root zone of each plant and apply liquid seaweed or fish fertiliser on a regular basis.

Preparation and Use:

Nutritionally similar to other members of the cabbage family, kohlrabi is an excellent source of vitamin C, especially when eaten raw. Young leaves can be sliced thinly for use in coleslaw and the grated stem used raw in salads. The leaves and leaf stalks can be added to soups, stir fried or substituted in most recipes requiring cabbage.

Try boiling the swollen stem with the skin on, then peel, chop and serve with a little butter and freshly cracked pepper. You can stir-fry the partially boiled cubes with a little garlic or use in soups, curries and casseroles.

Seed Saving:

Gardeners wishing to save seed from their kohlrabi plants must be patient and determined. Kohlrabi is a biennial plant. In other words, it puts its energy into vegetative growth during the first growing season, then flowers and produces seed during the second season.

In coastal tropical and subtropical regions with humid, wet summers it is often difficult to keep plants growing on through the warmest months of the year. Many fall victim to root rot disease. In areas with dry summers it is just a matter of keeping plants watered and helping them to continue their growth cycle with applications of liquid manure or soluble fish fertiliser.

Like other members of the brassica family, kohlrabi is promiscuous and will cross-pollinate readily with other species of this group that happen to be flowering at the same time. It is therefore imperative that kohlrabi is isolated from broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, kale or



related plants that are flowering at the same time in order to preserve the purity of your seed. You will need to allow several plants to go to flower to ensure cross-pollination between kohlrabi plants and maintain adequate biological diversity in the resultant seed.