

Eat More Kale

It's too good to pass up

No one needs to be told that dark green leafy vegetables are loaded with nutrients, but not everyone likes kale, and that's too bad. Kale is one of the hardiest and most nutritious members of the cabbage family and by far the easiest to grow. It can also be harvested almost any time of year. For anyone with a dream of self-sufficiency — or just an urge to supplement the family diet with extra-nourishing greens — kale seems too good to pass up.

Those of us who love it eat kale all year round, but what makes kale especially valuable is its availability in late fall, winter and early spring. Spring-sown kale can be harvested, leaf by leaf, late summer through winter. You start with the lower leaves. Cut, don't pull, each leaf, leaving a nubbin of leaf stalk, to protect the buds in the leaf axils. Buds should sprout in early spring of the following year, and they make delicious eating.

A fresh crop of kale for fall-through-spring harvest should be sown in June or early July, but later sowings are also possible (at least six weeks before frost). Nick Routledge is experimenting with different varieties and sowing times for the School Garden Project of Lane County. Plants from late sowings won't make big plants by fall, he says, but they will winter over and bulk up for harvest in March and April, a time when fresh, local greens are hard to come by.

Nurturing direct-sown seedlings through the hot weeks of July and August (even supposing you have room for them among your summer bounty) can be a challenge, so many gardeners raise or purchase starts, planting them out after the weather cools and some garden space becomes available. The little plants will still need abundant water and protection from slugs. Row covers help exclude cabbage loopers, though kale seems less attractive to loopers than other cabbage crops.

Different varieties of kale vary in flavor, heat tolerance and many other qualities. Although most seed catalogs don't make this clear, it is helpful to know that there are two main groups of kale. Scotch or curly kale, such as the varieties Redbor and Winterbor, grow 2 to 3 feet tall, the stems loosely clad with leaves that facilitate leaf by leaf harvest. Although Scotch kales grow sweeter and more tender in cold weather, some people still find them unappealing. More popular (though still in the same group) are laciniata or black kale varieties such as Toscano, with long, dark green puffy-looking leaves. Mature plants look like little palm trees.

The second important kale group, sometimes called napus kales, includes Siberian and Russian varieties. They are more compact, with a short central stem, and tend to be milder tasting and more tender. Young napus kale leaves are preferred for tossing in a salad mix. Winter Red, a popular Russian type from Territorial Seed



Nick Routledge shows off kale starts at Springfield Youth Farm

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Company, is purplish gray and frilly, with beautiful red ribs. White Russian is green with deeply cut edges. Both originated here in Oregon, which appears to be a hotbed of napus kale selection.

Napus kales are readily available as open pollinated, not hybrid, seed. That means you can save seed from your own plants and expect the progeny to be similar in quality to the parents. These kales (*Brassica napu*, or *B. oleracea* var. *fimbriata*) are genetically distinct from Scotch kale (*B. oleracea* *acephala*). While Scotch will interbreed with many other members of the cabbage family, napus kales cross only with rutabaga. If you and your neighbors don't grow rutabagas (or at least don't let them flower!) selecting and growing kale from your own seed should be a cinch. Territorial Seed sells Wild Garden Kales, a mix of Russian and Siberian types that would make a good starting point.

Kale is generally biennial, flowering in spring of the second year and ripening seed in summer or fall. For useful information on saving kale seed, see *Gardening When it Counts* by Steve Solomon. For a thorough account of seed saving and plant breeding in all its aspects, see Carol Deppe's book *Breed Your Own Vegetable Varieties: The Gardener's and Farmer's Guide to Plant Breeding and Seed Saving*.

Braised Kale

Rinse a bunch of kale (barely enough for two kale lovers, but adequate for four cautious eaters), shake off excess water and cut the leaves crosswise into strips about three quarters of an inch wide. Heat a tablespoon of olive oil in a heavy pot. Add two crushed cloves of garlic and stir them around in the hot oil. Add all the kale at once and cover the pot. When it quiets down, remove the lid, add a little salt and stir until all the kale looks oily. Add a half cup of water, turn the heat to low and cover the pot. Cook 10 minutes or more, until the greens are acceptably tender and delicious.

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Rachel Foster of Eugene does not currently grow kale, but she eats a lot of it. Contact her at rfoster@efn.org for referrals to the people on the cutting edge of kale culture.



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