

Growing Guide: Cabbage

Cabbage is a vegetable that does not get the attention it deserves in the United States. Other than using it as the basis for creamy coleslaw or, if you're ambitious, making homemade sauerkraut, cabbage is rarely the star of an American meal. This is unfortunate, because cabbage has so many wonderful qualities it deserves the royal treatment in the kitchen.



It's affordable. It's often one of the least expensive vegetables at the market.

It's versatile. It can be eaten raw, pickled, steamed, sautéed, roasted, and added to stir-fries and soups. Steamed leaves can be wrapped around vegetables and meats.

It's super-nutritious. It's an excellent source of vitamins C and K, as well as dietary fiber and contains Vitamins B1 and B6, manganese, potassium, and many other nutrients.

It's good for your health in other ways. Phytonutrients and sulfur-containing compounds are two of the substances in cabbage that are believed responsible in reducing risk of cancer, improving nervous system health, and aiding digestion, among other health benefits.

It's also **easy to grow** and **stores well**.

Types of Cabbage

Cabbage is closely related to other "cruciferous" vegetables (also called "cole crops"), including broccoli, cauliflower, kale, and Brussels sprouts. In fact, these plants are all the same species: *Brassica oleracea*. They differ widely in appearance due to centuries of breeding and selection starting with what was likely a wild field cabbage.

The most familiar types of cabbage are green cabbage, red cabbage, and savoy cabbage.

Green cabbage: Mature heads can weigh 8 lbs. or more, depending on the variety. Plant breeders have developed varieties with specific characteristics, such as those that produce smaller heads, and those that are especially good "keepers."

Red cabbage: Similar to green cabbage, with slightly higher phytonutrient levels due intense red color.

Savoy cabbage: Crinkled leaves are somewhat more tender, with a milder flavor, than green or red cabbages.

Growing Cabbage

Cabbage is a cool-weather crop that prefers temperatures between 40 and 70 degrees F. If you're growing where temperatures heat up in late spring, choose fast-maturing varieties — also good choices for fall planting. Cabbage is a good winter crop in regions with mild winters.

Garden Preparation

Choose a spot in full sun and well-drained soil. Raised beds are a good choice; the soil dries out faster in spring so you can get plants in the ground earlier. Loosen soil to a depth of at least 10 inches, and mix in some compost and/or organic, slow-release fertilizer. These will provide the cabbage plants, which are heavy feeders, with nutrients all season.

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Starting from Seed

Unless you have the perfect, cool climate for growing cabbages, it's easiest to plant cabbage in your outdoor garden as transplants rather than directly from seed. You can grow your own seedlings indoors under lights. Sow seeds about six weeks before your last spring frost date. The seeds germinate and grow quickly. Plan to set the seedlings into the garden two weeks before your last frost date.

Care

Cabbage has shallow roots that are easily damaged by a hoe. To keep weeds at bay, mulch the plants with straw or shredded leaves.

If your region has problems with flea beetles, cabbageworms, or cabbage loopers, cover the plants with a lightweight fabric row cover, securing it all along the ground.

Water the plants regularly throughout the growing season.

Cabbage heads are prone to cracking or splitting if a wet period follows a prolonged dry spell. Other things that can cause cracking include late-season fertilizing, extra-large heads, and variety. If you see a split starting to form on a cabbage and you aren't ready to harvest, grab the head and twist it 180 degrees to break some of the roots. This will slow its growth, and, hopefully, stop the crack.

To harvest, cut the cabbage stem close to the head. Immediately use any that are split or damaged; store only clean, intact heads. Store in a cold, moist place (32-40 degrees F.) Properly stored cabbage will keep for months.

Fun Facts

- Cabbage is a biennial plant, which means it completes its life cycle in two growing seasons. The first season, a biennial grows foliage — in this case, the head of cabbage. If the cabbage isn't harvested, then the following growing season it will form a flower stalk and produce seeds. Then the mother plant dies.
- The term cruciferous, used to describe cabbage-family plants, is derived from the Latin word for cross, alluding to the cross-shaped arrangement of petals on the flowers. The word "cole" in cole crops derives from a Latin word for stem.
- In 2017 the U.S. per capita consumption of cabbage was about 6 lbs. In contrast, Russians ate an average of 44 lbs. per person.
- The waxy "bloom" on cabbage leaves (especially noticeable on red cabbage) is the plant's way of conserving moisture and deterring insect pests.
- **Bonnie Plants 3rd Grade Cabbage Program** - Bonnie Plants delivers millions of [free cabbage plants](#) each year to students in third grade classes throughout the country. The program offers students a chance to get a unique, hands-on gardening experience through growing colossal cabbages, reaping hefty harvests, and holding high hopes to win "best in state" and receive a \$1,000 scholarship towards education from Bonnie Plants.

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