

Collard Greens Growing Guide

Collard greens are a leafy green in the cabbage family. A highly nutritious vegetable with humble origins, collards have achieved the status of “super-food” in the eyes of nutritionists and food enthusiasts. These greens stand out from other cabbage-family plants in their tolerance to both cold and hot temperatures, as well as high humidity. Their loose-leaf (non-heading) form makes them less susceptible to fungal diseases compared with their tight-leaved and head-forming relatives, such as cabbage and cauliflower.



The history of collard greens in the U.S. is deeply tied to the South and has roots in the kitchen gardens of enslaved Africans, who relied on the greens for sustenance. Collard greens thus came to symbolize resilience, endurance, and hope in the face of adversity. The greens are now a staple in Southern cuisine and are commonly cooked with ham hocks, smoked turkey, bacon, or other smoked or salted meats, a process that also yields a delicious and nutritious broth (“pot liquor” or “pot likker”). Collard greens’ important cultural connections and rich culinary history, along with the plant’s hardiness and adaptability, make them an excellent addition to youth gardens.

Collard Greens Facts

- Although commonly grown as an annual and harvested at the end of the growing season, collard green plants are biennial — that is, they complete their life cycle in two years. In the first season, they grow foliage and store nutrients in their fleshy leaves. If the plants are left to grow for a second season, these nutrients fuel additional leaf growth, as well as the formation of flowers and seeds. However, collard greens that are planted in the fall, and experience a cold season can produce flowers and seeds the following late spring/summer.
- The wild ancestor of collards and many cabbage-family plants, *Brassica oleracea*, is believed to be native to the Mediterranean region, and the plant has been cultivated for thousands of years. Many variations were developed during this time, including not only collard greens but also cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower, kale, kohlrabi, and Brussels sprouts. Although they look and taste different, they’re all the same species!
- How did collards become a symbol of Southern cuisine? Dark, leafy greens like collards have always played an important role in the cuisines of West Africa. In the United States collard greens were rejected by enslavers as a food crop because of their more bitter taste and longer cooking time. However, due to these qualities that were reminiscent of West African greens, collards became one of the vegetables that Africans grew to supplement the meager rations they were given, such as discarded scraps like pig’s feet and ham hocks. Through growing collards, they were able to continue using and sharing traditional West African cooking techniques. Under appalling conditions, they showed remarkable tenacity and skill in cultivating and cooking the greens their families needed to survive. The delicious and nutritious dishes they created from these ingredients eventually grew to become an iconic part of Southern cooking.
- Knowledge of edible native plants was shared with Africans by Native Americans during a time of much conflict and violence towards both groups by European colonists. This knowledge led over time to hybridization between introduced collards and native brassicas which has resulted in many of the heirloom varieties we have today.

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- Collards continue to be a powerful symbol connecting Black and African Americans to their history, culture, and global community. Jazz great, Thelonious Monk, wore a pin in the shape of a collard leaf on his lapel, for example, and the Obamas served collard greens at their first state dinner.
- With such a long history of cultivation, this family of plants has many names associated with it. Botanically speaking, the family is *Brassicaceae*, formerly *Cruciferae*. So, the common names for this group of vegetables include brassicas, crucifers, and cole crops. The term “crucifer” has its root in the Latin term for “cross-bearing” and refers to the flower’s four petals arranged in the shape of a cross. The term “cole crops” derives from “colewort,” a medieval name for the wild ancestor, and the name collards may derive from this name as well.
- Collards contain abundant vitamins and minerals, are one of the best non-dairy sources of calcium, and have antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties. The broth created when they’re boiled becomes a concentrated source of nutrients.
- Collard greens became the official vegetable of South Carolina in 2011.

How to Grow

Cold-hardy and heat-tolerant, collards grow well in all regions and are suitable for planting in the garden, in raised beds, and in containers. Although the leaves can be harvested at any time, their flavor becomes sweeter after a few frosts. In northern climates, collards are usually grown for a fall harvest. In USDA Hardiness Zones 8 and warmer, they’re often planted in the fall and harvested throughout the winter. Collards are ready to harvest 60 to 80 days after sowing.

Choosing varieties

The produce section of most supermarkets includes just a single type of collard. However, there are dozens of varieties, including some with curly leaves and others with red or purple foliage. “Tree collards” produce leaves along a tall stalk. Some varieties have glossy leaves, in contrast to the more familiar matte-leaved varieties. All are good choices for youth gardens, though the seeds of unusual varieties may be more difficult to find.

Selecting a site

Collards grow best in full sun, though, like other leafy greens, they tolerate part sun. They require rich, well-drained soil, so add plenty of compost prior to planting. The plants grow large, with some reaching 3’ or taller, so plant them where they won’t shade nearby crops.

Sowing seeds

In northern regions, start seeds indoors 8 weeks before your last spring frost date and set the plants outdoors a few weeks before your last frost date. In warm climates, you can grow a spring crop by sowing seeds in early spring — either starting them indoors or sowing the seeds directly into garden beds. Sow a second crop in early fall for a fall/winter harvest. You can sow seeds any time if you plan to harvest small leaves for fresh eating.

Care

Once plants are up and growing well, mulch the soil with a 2” to 3” layer of compost or other organic mulch to conserve soil moisture and deter weeds. Water regularly throughout the growing season, especially during hot, dry weather. Collards require a consistent supply of nutrients and benefit from a twice-monthly application of organic fertilizer. Like other cabbage-family plants, collard greens are susceptible to several pests, including aphids, flea beetles, cabbage loopers, and cabbage worms. You can grow plants under row covers, and incorporate companion plants like marigolds and basil to keep these pests at bay.

Harvest

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Harvest young greens any time to enjoy fresh in salads. As the greens age, they'll become tougher and will need to be cooked.

Tips

- Collard greens thrive in cool temperatures and tolerate frosts and freezes. However, be sure to harvest them before temperatures drop into the mid-20s F.
- The plants will bolt (send up a flower stalk) in their second season of growth. Once they do this, the leaves become smaller and more bitter.

Enjoying Your Harvest

For a traditional recipe, cook collard greens in a large pot with smoked or salted meats (ham hocks, smoked turkey, fatback, or bacon), diced onions, and vinegar. A dash of crushed red pepper adds some heat, if desired. Soak up the delicious broth with cornbread.

Collard greens and black-eyed peas are traditionally eaten on New Year's Day to bring wealth and good fortune in the coming year.

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