



Hail Kale

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

A light frost touched many gardens this past weekend. While this may halt production of more tender crops like beans and zucchini, light frosts add sweetness to cool season cole crops like kale. Maturing in about 50 days, kale can be planted in early spring and again in August for a late season harvest. The young leaves of spring kales are tender and sweet and great in salads and stir fries. Late maturing kales are often too fibrous to eat raw but excel in soups and stews.

Kale is a member of the brassica or mustard family along with cabbages, broccoli and Brussels sprouts. All are rich in nutrients. Kale is loaded with calcium, antioxidants, iron, vitamins K and C and other healthy compounds.

It is believed that kale has been cultivated as a food plant for almost 4000 years. This plant is thought to have originated in the eastern Mediterranean and Asia Minor. The Romans grew Sabellian kale, which is considered to be an ancestor to the kales we grow today. Kale came to America in part because of the efforts of USDA botanist, David Fairchild who found to be an inexpensive, easy to grow leafy green. For years, it was used as a decorative garnish until revelations about kale's health benefits became known in the 1990s.

Since then, kale has become a staple in many home gardens as well as many a family's dinner table. Gardeners enjoy its ease of cultivation along with abundant harvests. Kale germinates in 5 to 17 days from seed depending on soil temperatures. Often spring plantings are direct seeded as many more varieties are available as seed then as transplants. Seeds are sown about one-quarter inch deep and after germination, seedlings are thinned to 6 to 12 inches apart depending on the variety. For a fall crop, I start seeds in 6 packs on my porch in early August and then transplant the seedlings into the garden. Visiting a local garden center last week, I noticed that they had transplants of kale which were about the same size as mine.

Kale does best in moderately fertile soils in full sun but can tolerate some shade. Like all vegetables, kale appreciates a well-drained soil and a soil pH in the mid 6's. Leafy greens thrive

on nitrogen so be sure to fertilize before planting either as directed by a soil test or following the fertilizer package recommendation.

The biggest pest problem with all brassicas is caterpillars. These luscious, nutritious plants are not just coveted by us but by 3 members of the Lepidoptera family – the cabbage worm, the cabbage looper and the cross-striped cabbage worm. The later is the worst pest as dozens of eggs are laid on each plant and without control, these creatures can render that crop of kale into what resembles Swiss cheese. Fortunately, all can be stopped by using a biological control, Bt (or *Bacillus thuringiensis*). Plan on spraying plants at the first sign of damage and then every other week. This bacterium only affects members of the Lepidoptera family and as the caterpillars feed on the sprayed leaves, they stop developing and die. Another option would be to grow plants under netted tunnels so the adult butterflies or moths cannot reach plants to lay eggs.

All kale varieties are good, but it is fun to try a new variety or two each year to figure out your family's favorite. Kales come in two main colors: blue-green and reddish, and two main leaf types: curly and blistered.

The curly or frilly kales can be dark green to purplish in color with ruffled leaves. Not only are they tasty and healthy but they look fabulous in both the vegetable garden (especially when paired with blue bachelor buttons or orange calendulas) as well as in annual beds (just don't harvest whole plants). Favorite blue-green varieties include 'Winterbor', 'Dwarf Siberian' and 'White Russian'. 'Redbor' and 'Red Russian' are popular red/purple leaved varieties.

My preference is to grow the Lacinato types as the leaves are 2 to 3 inches wide and long but puckered or blistered instead of frilly. This makes Bt applications a lot easier. Often referred to as 'dinosaur' kales because of their scaly textures, I find them less bitter when mature or over mature and great in my beef, barley and kale soup. My favorite is 'Nero di Toscano' but 'Black Magic' and 'Dazzling Blue' are some other cultivars I may try.

Just in case you are wondering, ornamental kales are edible but reputedly not that palatable. I have not tried to eat them but love them in my fall window boxes and other containers.

For information on growing kales or for questions on other gardening topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.



