

BACKYARD COLE CROPS FOR THIS TIME OF YEAR

By Ralph E. Mitchell

If you like broccoli and collards as I do, you should keep in mind that these are two very easy-to-grow vegetables that should be planted in your garden at this time of year. Classified as Cole crops which include vegetables such as Brussels Sprouts, Cabbage, Cauliflower, Kale, Mustard and Turnips, broccoli and collards do best during our cooler fall and winter season.

Full of nutrition and popular since the Roman Empire, and grown in about 15% of all United States gardens, broccoli is easy to grow. While the history of broccoli goes back thousands of years, it really was not a popular vegetable until about 100 years ago in the United States. We commonly grow "sprouting broccoli" in the United States. The familiar branching cluster of sprouts with side sprouts is really a large edible, flower head. Harvest can occur in as early as 60 days for some varieties; up to 100 days for others. Start your broccoli patch with a full sun area and work in organic matter such as compost into the soil. Prepare the soil pre-plant with a granular commercial vegetable fertilizer applied as per label instructions. Four to five-week-old transplants work better than direct seeding and should be placed 18 to 24 inches apart in rows 36 to 40 inches apart. To avoid pests such as cutworms which may chew down a tender young transplant, put a four-inch cardboard collar around each newly planted plant to act as a barrier. As the plants grow, consider applying a side dressing of granular fertilizer, again as per label instructions.

There are many broccoli varieties to choose from. Waltham 29, Green Mountain, Spartan Early, Atlantic, Green Sprouting, Green Comet, Italian Green Sprouting, DeCicco, Green Duke and Packman are very suitable for Florida gardens. Check local garden centers for availability. You may have to send for seed from a catalog or internet source to obtain some varieties.

When should you harvest your broccoli? Make sure to pick it when the head is tight and compact. Don't wait too long as yellow flowers will begin to open at some point decreasing the quality of the broccoli. Include a good five inches of stalk with the head. As an added bonus, side shoots will develop offering smaller, but steady harvests for some time. Store unwashed in a plastic bag in the crisper of your refrigerator. Rinse well before eating or cooking. Include broccoli as part of your vegetable garden or as an edible ornamental.

For as long as I can remember, collards have always reminded me of kale. I've never been a real fan of kale, a close relative of collards. I do like the looks of flowering kale; an ornamental plant. But, I really do not enjoy eating kale as a green. I do however, enjoy collards! Maybe it is the way they are prepared, but I find them sweet with a nice texture. Beyond the fact that they are really good to eat, collards are very easy to grow and have their own history to boot.

Botanical historians say that the collard plant has not changed much in 2,000 years! The name collard is said to be a corruption of the Anglo-Saxon words coleworts or colewyrts which meant cabbage plants. Collards are direct relatives of cabbages and accordingly, are biennials. Biennials produce foliage the first year and then send up a flower stalk the second, set seed and die. One of the best qualities about collards and their relatives is the ability to tolerate cold temperatures. Collards can handle temperatures down to 15 degrees F. In fact, the cool temperatures that we experience in fall and winter in this part of Florida provide conditions that improve the quality and taste of collard greens.

You can plant collards directly in the garden as seed. Transplants do even better and are readily available at many local garden centers.

Arrange the transplants with 18 inches between plants in rows 36 inches apart. Fertile soil amended with a good amount of compost is ideal for collard growing. Use as granular vegetable fertilizer similar to what was recommended for broccoli.

When selecting a type of collard to grow, consider several standard varieties. Vates is a wavy-leafed variety resistant to bolting (going to seed) and very tolerant to cold weather. Georgia, though less resistant to cold and bolting, is a good variety that grows up to six feet tall and has smooth leaves and whitish stems. Other varieties good for Florida would

include Heavycrop, Blue Max, and Morris Heading.

Your first collard harvest can be expected in six to eight weeks from planting. You can either "crop" the leaves leaving only the bud to grow new leaves or take the whole plant all at once. Wash the leaves and cool them in a refrigerator crisper.

Have I wet your appetite for broccoli and collard greens as yet? Go grow some of these traditional and historical plants in you garden today!

For more information on all types of vegetables that you can grow in your yard, please contact our Master Gardeners on the Plant Lifeline at 941.764.4340 from 1:00pm-4:00pm Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Our office is located at 25550 Harbor View Road, Suite 3, in Port Charlotte. Our **Plant Clinics** are available across the county:

- **Demonstration Garden** every Thursday from 9:00am until 11:00am.
- **Englewood/Charlotte Public Library** 10:00am-1:00pm every Thursday (starting October 4th).
- **Mid-County Regional Library** 1st and 3rd Thursday of month from 1:00pm-3:00pm.
- **Edison College Learning Resources Library** 3rd Tuesday of month 1:00pm-4:00pm.

Monthly **Plant Clinics** are Saturdays 9:00am-12:00pm at the following locations:

- **Englewood/Charlotte Public Library** 1st Saturday of month.
- **Peachland Promenades Publix** - 2nd Saturday of month.
- **Home Depot Murdock & Home Depot Punta Gorda** - 3rd Saturday of month.

Ralph Mitchell is the County Extension Director/Horticulture Agent for the Charlotte County Cooperative Extension Service. You may contact him by e-mail (Ralph.Mitchell@charlottefl.com). You may also contact a volunteer Master Gardener 1:00pm-4:00pm Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 941.764.4340 or by e-mail (Master.Gardener@charlottefl.com).

For more information about our Florida Yards and Neighborhoods Program, please contact our FYN Horticulture Program Assistant, Allison Steele, at 941.764.4340. Allison can help educate you about the Florida Yards & Neighborhoods Program so that you can create a beautiful, Florida-Friendly landscape that saves you time and money while conserving precious water resources and reducing pollution.

Resource:

Stephens, J. M. (2003) Broccoli - Brassica oleracea L. The University of Florida Extension Service, IFAS.

Stephens, J. M. (2003) Collards - Brassica oleracea L. The University of Florida Extension Service, IFAS.