

GROWING YOUR OWN COOL SEASON COLE CROPS

Now is the perfect time to take advantage of our cooler weather and plant a vegetable garden that will not only save you money, but also add fresh, nutritious vegetables to your diet. Vegetables like broccoli, cabbage, and collards, members of a group of vegetables called Cole crops, are incredibly easy to grow. Started from seed or transplants, these vegetables will thrive in our present cool weather and don't need a tremendous amount of space to grow.

Like all of the "Cole crops", broccoli does best during our fall and winter season. Full of nutrition, just one-half cup of this Mediterranean vegetable has more than half the vitamin C we need every day. 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. Your first harvest can occur in as early as 60 days for some varieties; up to 100 days for others. Start your broccoli patch in a full sun area and work plenty of compost into the soil. Also, work in a commercial granular fertilizer suitable for vegetables such as 8-8-8 or its equivalent as per label instructions, one to two weeks before planting. Band some additional fertilizer at planting time in one or two bands each two to three inches to the side of and one to two inches below the seed level or plant row. Four to five-week old transplants work better than direct seeding and should be placed 18-24 inches apart in rows about 36 inches apart. To avoid pests such as cutworms which may chew down a tender young transplant, place 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 vegetable fertilizer as per label instruc-



tions. 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. 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.

Cabbage is just as easy as broccoli to grow. Cabbage varieties suitable for Florida include 'Gourmet', 'Marion Market', 'King Cole', 'Market Prize', 'Red Acre', 'Chieftan Savoy', 'Rio Verde', and 'Bravo'. If you buy seedlings, make sure to purchase clean transplants to avoid cabbage black-rot, a common bacterial disease that causes yellow patches on leaf margins. Also keep an eye out for cabbage looper caterpillars which can be controlled with a Bt product. Plant cabbage seedlings 12-24 inches apart in rows spaced 24-36 inches apart. You can expect about 125 pounds of cabbage for every 100 foot planting - that is a lot of cole slaw! For something a little different, try a variety of Chinese cabbage. More mustard-like in nature, Chinese cabbage types such as Michihili, Bok Choy, and Napa grow just as well as our more familiar cabbage

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varieties. Bok Choy has an open-leaf growth, while Michihili and Napa form round upright to oblong heads ready in about 90 days from seed.

Collards are direct relatives of cabbages and accordingly, are biennials. Biennials plants produce foliage the first year and then send up a flower stalk the second; ultimately dying. 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. 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.

Start your own backyard garden and begin with some broccoli, cabbage and collards. Your success will be impressive and reward you with many tasty meals!

photos courtesy of
www.wikipedia.com

Resource:

Stephens, J.M. (1994) *Broccoli - Brassica oleracea*. UF/IFAS Extension Service.
 Hillan, J. (2001) *Florida Fresh: Broccoli*. UF/IFAS Extension Service.
 Stephens, J.M. (1994) *Collards, Brassica oleracea*, UF/IFAS Extension Service.
 Stephens, J.M.; Dunn, R.A.; Kidder, G.; Short, D.; & Simone, G.W. (2003) *Florida Vegetable Gardening Guide*. UF/IFAS Extension Service.
 Meadows, J. & King, M. (2008) *Cabbage- Florida Food Fare*. UF/IFAS Extension Service, Sarasota.

For more information on all types of vegetables, 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.

MONTHLY PLANT CLINICS ARE SATURDAYS FROM 9:00AM-12:00PM.

- **Powell's Nursery** 1st Saturday of month
- **Peachland Publix**..... 2nd Saturday of month
- **Home Depot (Punta Gorda, Port Charlotte, Englewood)** 3rd Saturday of month
- **Lowes** 4th Saturday of month

PLANT CLINICS AVAILABLE ACROSS THE COUNTY:

- **Demonstration Garden** (6900 Florida Street, PG) Thursdays 9:00am-11:00am.
- **Englewood/Charlotte Public Library** Thursdays 10:00am-1:00pm.
- **Mid-County Regional Library** 1st and 3rd Thursday of month 1:00pm-3:00pm.
- **Punta Gorda Library** 2nd and 4th Wednesday of month from 10:00am-1:00pm.
- **Edison College Learning Resources Library** 3rd Tuesday of month 1:00pm-4:00pm.
- **South Gulf Cove Learning Garden** (13577 Blake Drive, PC) 3rd Wednesday of month from 9:00am-12:00pm.

Ralph Mitchell (Ralph.Mitchell@charlottefl.com) is the County Extension Director/Horticulture Agent for Charlotte County Extension Service. Contact a volunteer Master Gardener from 1:00pm-4:00pm Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 941.764.4340 or by email (Master.Gardener@charlottefl.com).

For more information about our Florida Yards and Neighborhoods Program, please contact our FYN Horticulture Program Assistant, Allison Steele, at 941.764.4351. 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.