



All About Growing Cabbage

Story at-a-glance

- ▶ Cabbage has a long growing season and can be grown in both warm and cold-weather climates
- ▶ Cabbage is easy to grow from seed, provided seedlings are started indoors
- ▶ While some cabbage plants reach maturity in 90 days, early varieties take just 60 days to reach maturity; you'll probably want to plant an early crop to harvest during the summer months, as well as a late crop for fall/winter harvest

By Dr. Mercola

With its high concentrations of antioxidants and anti-inflammatory compounds, cabbage is one of the healthiest vegetables you can eat. As a cruciferous veggie, in the same family as broccoli, Brussels sprouts and cauliflower, it also contains glucosinolates, phytochemicals that break down into indoles, sulforaphane and other cancer-preventive substances.

Different types of cabbage (red, green and Savoy) contain different patterns of glucosinolates, which suggests you should try to eat a variety of cabbage for the best health effects. Its variety is another one of cabbage's pluses — it comes in hundreds of different types and is incredibly versatile. Eaten raw, cabbage is a mainstay of cole slaw and other summer salads. It's also one of the most popular base vegetables for creating your own [homemade sauerkraut](#).

Cooked lightly and quickly, cabbage also makes an excellent side dish to virtually any protein source and can be seasoned in a number of different ways depending on the type of cuisine. You may be tempted to rely on your local grocery store for cabbage, but growing your own is so much more rewarding, both in terms of freshness and flavor. What's more, growing cabbage is incredibly easy, and if you time your planting right you can expect to harvest it during the summer as well as the late cold-weather season.

Choose the Right Varieties for the Growing Season

Cabbage is one of those vegetables that [taste better after a frost](#). This is because as temperatures drop, the cold causes the plants to break down energy stores into sugar, leading to a sweeter, tastier flavor. Some types of cabbage can even be grown in temperatures as low as 26 degrees F.¹

Most winter veggies are planted in mid- to late summer so they are strong and ready for when the temperatures drop, and then ripe for harvest in winter or early spring. Timing this depends on how long each plant takes to reach maturity, however, and this is where choosing the proper varieties is key.

While some cabbage plants reach maturity in 90 days, early varieties take just 60 days to reach maturity. Further, you'll probably want to plant a crop to harvest during the summer months, as well.

As Rodale's Organic Life noted, "Cabbage thrives in cool weather. In most areas, you can plant an early crop for fresh eating and a late crop — usually the more problem free and tastier of the two — primarily for winter storage. Choose early varieties such as 'Primax' for summer harvest; midseason and late-season cultivars for storage."² Additional recommended varieties, according to The Old Farmer's Almanac, include the following:³

- *"If you are planting for a fall harvest, try red or Chinese cabbage. Good varieties include 'Ruby Perfection' and 'Lei-Choy.'*
- *For quick harvest time, try 'Golden Acre,' 'Primo' or 'Stonehead.'*
- *'Early Jersey Wakefield' resists splitting.*
- *Disease-resistant varieties include 'Blue Vantage' and 'Cheers.'"*

Other considerations in cabbage variety include size, color and texture. With its variety of cool hues and ruffled and crinkled leaves, many people plant cabbage as much for its ornamental appeal as they do for its culinary uses. Some of the more popular varieties to consider include:⁴

Savoy cabbage, which has dark green, crinkled outer leaves

Red cabbage, which contains antioxidant anthocyanins that give it its purple color

Napa cabbage, also called Chinese cabbage, matures quickly and has a mild flavor

Green cabbage, which comes in a variety of sizes with differing times to maturity

Pointed cabbage, which forms conical heads, helping to protect it from insects

Mini cabbages, such as the "Gonzales" variety, which can be harvested when they're 6 inches in diameter, making them ideal for small gardens⁵

It's Easy to Start Cabbage From Seed

While you can purchase cabbage plants at most garden centers, it's easy to grow them yourself from seed. Start seeds indoors eight to 10 weeks before your last frost of the spring for summer harvests,

and 12 to 14 weeks before your first fall frost for late varieties. "Place in a sunny spot or under lights with temperatures between 60 degrees and 70 degrees F, and keep the soil uniformly moist. When daytime temperatures reach 50 degrees F and seedlings have three leaves, plant them outdoors," Rodale's Organic Life recommends. In addition, they note:⁶

"Plant seedlings in the garden slightly deeper than they grew in flats. Space 6 to 12 inches apart in rows 1 to 2 feet apart. Wide spacings produce bigger heads, but young, small cabbages are tastier. To get both, plant 6 inches apart and harvest every other one before maturity. Stagger plantings at 2-week intervals for a longer harvest. Start your late crop in midsummer, sowing seeds in flats or directly in the garden. Space these seedlings farther apart than the spring crop."

As for seeds, look for non-GMO, organic seeds or consider saving seeds from your own crop. The latter may be a challenge, as cabbage produces seed in its second year (it's a biennial crop). This means only areas with mild winters will allow the seedlings to survive through the winter and produce seeds come summer. An alternative is to transfer cabbage plants in a cool place for the purpose of harvesting seeds the next growing season, according to Mother Earth News:⁷

"In colder climates, growers dig cabbage plants and move them to a cool root cellar for winter, burying the plants' roots in buckets of moist sawdust. The stored heads are trimmed and replanted in early spring."

Cabbage Planting Tips

A sunny, well-drained spot works best, and healthy soil will help your cabbage plants to thrive. Adding [organic compost](#) to your soil is recommended, as is a layer of mulch or wood chips to help lock in moisture. If your cabbage leaves start to yellow, adding compost tea, which is basically the liquid from compost steeped in water, to the soil as an extra feeding may boost plant growth and encourage faster maturation.⁸

Cabbage plants are heavy feeders, meaning they deplete the soil of nutrients relatively quickly. Because of this, it's best to plant them apart from other heavy feeders like broccoli and cauliflower. In addition, rotate crops each year to discourage diseases. Excess water (including heavy rain) can cause cabbages to split. If you notice a split starting, or expect a heavy rain to hit, use a spade to sever the plant's roots in one or two spots, or twist the plant, pulling up slightly, to dislodge the roots.

Both methods will slow the plant's growth, preventing splitting and bolting. If the cabbage does split, don't worry — it can still be used to make sauerkraut. As for pests, many, including harlequin bugs, slugs, snails and cabbage worms can be removed by hand (be sure to check the undersides of leaves). Damage from cutworms can be prevented by placing a "collar" made from a plastic cup around young seedlings (push it down about 1 inch into the soil). Common diseases to watch out for include the following:⁹

"Black leg, a fungal disease, forms dark spots on leaves and stems. Black rot symptoms include black and foul-smelling veins. Club root prevents water and nutrient absorption. Fusarium wilt, also known as yellows, produces yellow leaves and stunted heads. Remove and destroy plants affected by these diseases. If club root has been a problem in your garden, test soil pH before planting and add ground limestone if needed to raise the pH to at least 6.8."

Simple Harvest Tips

When the cabbage head is firm to the touch, use a sharp knife to cut it from the stalk. Heads that don't feel firm are not yet ready for harvest. Smaller cabbage heads will often grow from the stem, provided you leave the outer leaves and roots, so don't pull it out of the ground yet. If you're not interested in encouraging a second crop to grow, the loose outer leaves can be tossed into your compost pile or eaten — it's up to you.

Once the harvest is complete, pull the stem and root from the ground and compost the remainders (as long as the plant is healthy; avoid throwing diseased plants into your compost bin). Store cabbage in your refrigerator for two weeks or in cold storage (32 degrees to 40 degrees F) for five or six months (the latter being perfect for your winter harvest).

If you're wondering how much cabbage to grow, Mother Earth News recommends about three cabbage plants per person for enjoying fresh and four plants per person (in addition) for storing cabbage to make sauerkraut.¹⁰ [Cabbage](#) is best prepared as close to raw as possible, sometimes called tender-crisp, to preserve its many nutrients.

Cabbage can also be juiced and [fermented](#), which will provide your body with healthy amounts of beneficial bacteria and, if certain starter cultures are used, vitamin K2.

Ready to Enjoy? Healthy Cabbage Crunch Salad

There are many reasons to give cabbage a regular appearance at your mealtimes. It contains powerful antioxidants like vitamins A and C and phytonutrients such as thiocyanates, lutein, zeaxanthin, isothiocyanates and sulforaphane, which stimulate detoxifying enzymes and may protect against breast, colon and prostate cancers. Cabbage also contains a wealth of anti-inflammatory nutrients to help keep inflammation in check.

Among them are anthocyanins, a type of polyphenol that, as mentioned, is particularly plentiful in red cabbage, although all types of cabbage contain anti-inflammatory polyphenols. Cabbage also contains healthy amounts of B vitamins, including folate (which is better than the synthetic form known as folic acid found in many supplements), vitamin B6, vitamin B1 and vitamin B5.

[B vitamins](#) are not only important for energy, they may also slow brain shrinkage by as much as seven-fold in brain regions specifically known to be most impacted by [Alzheimer's disease](#).

If you're looking for a recipe to enjoy your cabbage raw that's a bit different than typical cole slaw recipes, try this healthy [Cabbage Crunch Recipe](#). With fresh ginger, miso paste and ground sesame, along with both red and green cabbage, it's packed with both intense flavor and valuable nutrition.

Ingredients (serves 6)

- 1/2 head red cabbage, chopped finely
- 1/2 head white cabbage, chopped finely
- 1/2 [red onion](#), chopped
- 1/2 cup chopped [cilantro](#)
- 1/2 jalapeno pepper, minced (optional)

For the Dressing:

- 1 teaspoon gomasio (ground sesame with salt)
- 1 cup almond butter
- 1/2 cup cilantro, chopped
- 1 tablespoon toasted sesame oil
- 1 tablespoon minced fresh [ginger](#)
- 1/2 jalapeno pepper, chopped (optional)
- Juice of half a [lemon](#)
- 1 tablespoon [apple cider vinegar](#)
- 1 tablespoon seasoned rice vinegar
- 1 cup [olive oil](#)
- 1 tablespoon white miso paste* (optional)

Procedure

1. Mix the cabbage with the chopped onions. Add cilantro and jalapeno.
2. Place all the dressing ingredients into a food processor and blend briefly. Mix into salad mix and serve.

*Can be found in the Asian aisle at the grocery store, or at an Asian market.

