

MADRYN'S MILLEFLEURS

4) COLEWORTS

Brassica spp. "Kale"

Brassica varieties, known today as the family which includes kale, cabbages, broccoli and caulis, were known in medieval times under the collective title of coleworts. During the height of the Roman empire, coleworts were cultivated widely, having been part of the southern European diet in its wild form for millennia. Several wild forms are still found and gathered locally around in the Mediterranean region today. As the Roman empire spread, so did coleworts, and many varieties were found to proliferate in Britain's cooler climate, often grown as an over-wintering vegetable.

Historical records indicate that of today's brassicas, kale has the closest links with medieval coleworts, and many types of kale currently available are cultivated wild strains, unaltered from their original forms, and identical to those grown by medieval gardeners. Other brassicas were a more modern development, particularly the heading varieties, such as cabbage

Varieties of kale are many, and very appealing for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the highly decorative appearance of some varieties, which make a rather glamorous as well as historical addition to the anachronist's vegetable garden.

Kale can be roughly described as an open form, tall, loose-leafed vegetable, which can grow to reach truly gargantuan proportions. A most generous plant, they are ideal for gardeners in a hurry, growing from seed to harvesting stage in a matter of weeks. However, whereas the gardener might cut an entire cabbage at harvest, thereby in effect killing the plant in order to eat it, kale can be harvested one leaf at a time, similar to older varieties of lettuce. This has the distinct advantage of allowing the gardener/cook to harvest fresh only what is needed for the meal that evening, allowing the remainder of the plant to continue growing, and supplying the kitchen for many months.

Because kale is a leafy vegetable, it thrives in nitrogen rich, deep and fertile soil in full sun. Soil is best prepared well in advance, by adding vast quantities of manure, straw, old leaf litter, compost, shredded newspapers, green manure or whatever other organic material is to hand. Blood and bone is a valuable addition to the mix. Thoroughly dampen the soil, and allow to sit for some weeks. At this stage, any weed seeds will germinate, and you can remove them easily by lightly hoeing over, prior to planting your kale. Kale is a cool weather crop, and although I have planted in both spring and autumn, my experience has been that those planted in autumn do far better, thriving in the cooler weather of autumn and winter, rather than having to cope with warmer conditions as spring moves into summer. In cool weather all brassicas are far less troubled by

insects. Because Wildwood is an organic garden I have very few pests here, but did notice to my consternation, that kale grown in summer is very popular with white cabbage butterflies. Rather than using dangerous sprays, the thoughtful gardener can instead plant in cooler times, and so avoid the butterfly hordes, keeping kitchen goodies and beneficial garden biota clean and chemical free.

I have grown kale from both seedling and seeds, and have found seeds to be far more successful. Kale has an excellent germination rate, and although one could be forgiven for thinking seedlings will give a quicker yield because they're already started, in fact the reverse is true. The shock of transplantation tends to hold seedlings in limbo for a time, during which they are often over-taken by those sown direct from seed. Planting out is simply a matter of choosing your varieties, making a shallow trench around 2cm deep in well prepared ground, and sprinkling seeds along the trench. Earth can be then gently pushed back into the trench with a light hoe, and watered in. And don't forget to label the row!

Young plants will appear in a matter of a week or two, and at this stage, I like to water gently with a dilute solution of fish and or seaweed emulsion. This really seems to kick things along, and this season I was harvesting sweet young leaves within 5 weeks of planting seeds out.

I grow several varieties here at Wildwood, and will describe only those I have first hand experience of, as the genus is too large to cover every variety.

Thousand head kale - this variety will astonish. Planted in a truly extraordinary compost mix this year at Wildwood, and preceded by potatoes, which add nitrogen to the soil, these amazing plants shot out of the ground like triffids. They currently stand almost chest high, with long, broad, bright green leaves, one of which measured an impressive 37cm by 30cm. Two or three leaves per person is sufficient for a generous serve. They are best suited to planting at the back of the bed, as they will swamp lesser beings. My Lord sent to gather leaves for a meal recently commented that he was afraid the plants would eat him! Atypically, this vegetable is a short lived perennial, and will remain productive for up to 3 or 4 years.

Russian red - a popular variety, high in the glamour stakes. The leaves are large, a rich blue-green, with intense magenta veins and stems. A stately plant reaching well over half a metre in height, they would not look out of place in the flower garden, their leaves deeply dissected, curled and frilly like a flamenco dancer's dress.

Cavello nero - darling of the chefs of Italy, this kale is very dark, almost blue-black, with many slender leaves, elongated and heavily wrinkled reminiscent of silver beet but with a superior flavour. It is a smaller plant than the aforementioned, but delicious, and well worth growing.

Blue curly leaf - wildly frilly, deep blue green, this is a smaller, flatter kale, and a fantasy of colour and form. I have planted mine in alternate rows with Bull's Blood beetroot, the deep red beetroot leaves alternating with flouncing deep blue kale adds vibrant colour both to the garden, and to the plate. This kale is very sweet and sugary, and perhaps my favourite for flavour.

Kale is becoming increasingly popular as an ornamental in stylish floral work, and can often be found as a centrepiece in contemporary florist's bouquets. Hobart City Council have been quick to exploit kale, and have planted out flower boxes in the inner city with ornamental kale, purely for it's decorative value. The anachronist might consider replacing a bed of useless modern flowers in the home garden with these colourful, decorative vegetables, and supply fresh produce to the kitchen at the same time.

Kale is considered to be one of the richest sources of dietary anti-oxidant's known. When kale is chewed, juiced or chopped, glucosinolates are converted into indoles and isothiocyanates, both of which detoxify cancer causing chemicals within the body, and also cause cancer cells to self-destruct (apoptosis). Kale also protects the eyes due it's high content of carotenoids, reducing the risk of macular degeneration and cataracts. A serve of kale contains more calcium than a glass of milk, and ranges between 8 and 10 times the vitamin C content of oranges. Those readers familiar with 81 year old garden guru Peter Cundall will know he attributes his amazing good health to ingesting vast quantities of kale.

Kale is effortless to prepare and takes only 2 or 3 minutes to cook. Just shred the leaves coarsely and lightly steam on low heat to a wilting stage in butter and freshly ground black pepper, or add chopped leaves to curries or hot-pots at the last moment before serving.

Kale is a joy to grow, the varieties, colours and forms highly decorative, of historical interest, and delicious to eat. It is easy, fast growing, and long lasting over winter. Three packets of seed sown direct at the end of February, have provided such a crop at Wildwood, that we are able to eat a large serve of kale daily, and not even make a dent in the size of these enormous beauties. I anticipate the crop will keep us and our neighbours in fresh greens until deep into summer - almost a year's worth of delicious, high nutrient greens for the grand cost of \$9.00.

Excellent varieties of open pollinated, non-GMO, non-hybrid kale are available through "The Lost Seed" at many garden centres or direct from the Tasmanian producer via www.thelostseed.com.au or from Phoenix Seeds of Snug. The Lost Seed also sells started punnets in season. If allowed to flower, kale will self-seed enthusiastically, but several varieties grown close together will be cross-pollinated by bees, and may not grown true to type. Kale requires protection from hens, wallabies and possums, but if grown in cool weather will have no other problems.

So throw away your synthetic vitamin pills, and grow kale instead!

References: In a Unicorn's Garden, Judith Mcleod 2008, Gardening Australia
ABCTV (multiple episodes) Anti-Cancer Foods, Roger French, Vegetarian Starter
Kit, TasVeg

Yours in Service,
Lady Madryn of Wildwood