



ASK A MASTER GARDENER

GROWING CABBAGES

By Laurie Meyerpeter, Placer County Master Gardener

Q I want to grow cabbages in my fall garden. Any suggestions?

A Cabbages are a lot like tomatoes because there is really no comparison between the sweet crispy buttery flavored heads grown in a home garden, and the strong tasting cabbages sold in supermarkets. And cabbage is a fun crop to grow, conjuring up Peter Rabbit and Mr. McGregor's garden.

Cabbages were once more popular than they are today, with dozens of varieties for different uses. Some varieties were grown for eating fresh and had sweet, tender, crispy leaves. Others were selected for winter storage qualities. Still others were grown for making sauerkraut. Cabbages of some form are grown nearly worldwide.

Newbie cabbage growers will want to start with transplants from a nursery. Nurseries usually offer cabbage seedlings now for fall harvest or you can wait until next spring. Plant in fertile soil amended with plenty of compost. Space them about 24" apart so they have room to spread and grow, with 36" between rows. Close spacing reduces the size of the cabbage heads; however, Chinese (Napa) cabbage and some smaller varieties can be planted closer together. Some extra large varieties should be planted even further apart! Provide regular moisture if rainfall is scanty. Fertilize if necessary; cabbage are average to heavy feeders, especially the larger varieties.

The most common cabbage pests are those voracious and pesky caterpillars and Bt or *Bacillus thuringiensis* is a safe, effective, organic treatment. Snails and slugs can sometimes be a problem as well. Trap or handpick snails and slugs or bait with Iron Phosphate baits, which are safe and effective against snails.

Harvest when the cabbage forms heads, and the heads are quite firm and well filled.

Experienced gardeners may want to try growing cabbages from seed. Mail order catalogs that specialize in heirloom varieties will offer the best selection. These catalogs offer early cabbages, ox-heart type cabbages, bull-heart type cabbages, cabbages with huge flat heads, round headed cabbages, Savoy cabbages, cabbages for eating fresh, cabbages for storage...well, you get the picture! Cabbage seed sprouts readily and is easy to grow. Seeds can be started in pots or in a moist corner of the garden and then transplanted when ready, or can be direct seeded and thinned to the correct spacing once sprouted.

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