



## Ornamental Kale



By Kathie Carter  
Cooperative Extension/ Botany Plant Sciences Dept.  
University California Riverside

**Introduction:** You may not have noticed but there's something of a boom underway in the ornamental kale trade. These shockingly colorful kales are extremely useful during fall and early winter to landscapers in large gardens, who must please a public who have gotten tired of mums and pansies. At Disneyland and Disney World kales are often planted by the thousands. Hundreds of acres are planted and used in restaurants across the country, where they are served as garnishes or as an edible underlay on lavish salad platters.

Kale, also called Borecole, (*Brassica oleracea* var. *acephala*) and is a form of cabbage in which the central leaves do not form a head. It is considered to be closer to wild cabbage than most domesticated forms. *Brassica oleracea* contains a wide array of vegetables, including broccoli, cauliflower, and brussels sprouts. The cultivar botanical variety group *Acephala* means 'headless' and also includes spring greens and collard greens, which are extremely similar genetically.

Thus, ornamental kale is technically the same genus (*Brassica*) and species (*oleracea*) as the more familiar broccoli, cabbage, and other cole crops. It is also genetically the same as kale grown in vegetable gardens as an edible green. Ornamental kales were developed by plant breeders from edible kale varieties by selecting plants with unique foliage colors. Ornamental kales are still edible, but they are mostly used for garnishing cooked dishes or additions to seasonal color areas of a landscape because of their gorgeous color.



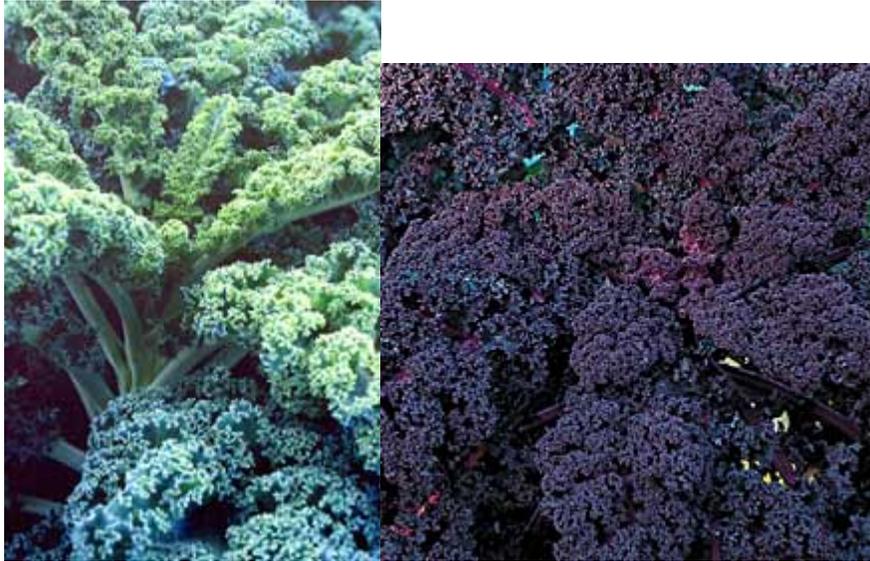
**Varieties:** The new varieties mostly come from Japan and are called leaf peonies. Uniformity in size, color and rate of growth of these ornamental bedding plants is a distinct plus for both gardeners and commercial landscape maintenance companies.

There are three distinct leaf types: crinkle-edged; feather-leaved; and round-leaved, which looks something like a collard or cabbage and may even be listed as "ornamental cabbage." Each kind comes with centers of red, pink or creamy white. The usual practice is to plant at least two types for contrast.

**History:** Kale is native to the eastern Mediterranean or to Asia Minor. It was present in 100 AD when the Greeks used them in their cooking along with the Romans and the early Christians. It is difficult to tell where kale originated as the plants were used widely and distributed by trade and barbarians.

Many people cook and eat kale, which contains beta-carotene, calcium, and vitamin C. The leaves can be blanched, steamed, stir fried, or added to soup. Roots of the plant are poisonous.

Ornamental kale is considered an annual, but botanically it is a biennial, meaning its life cycle occurs over two years. The first year it produces vegetative (leafy) growth, and the second year it produces reproductive growth (flowers). Gardeners value it for its vegetative rather than reproductive growth, so practically speaking it is treated as an annual in the garden, being replanted each year.



**General Care:** To grow any of the ornamental kales to perfection, timing needs to be precise. Coloration doesn't begin until night temperatures regularly drop below 60° F, and full coloration takes three to four weeks. The plants need to be almost full grown when coloring time arrives.

When growing plant form seed plan on growing the kales in containers for at least two months prior to transplanting them in the landscape. Plant seed 75 days before the onset of cool nights. Germination occurs in about 10 days at 70° F. Space the plants very closely together, about five or six inches apart. This keeps the heads small and forces elongated stems. Remove the lower leaves when the plants are six inches tall. You may have to do this several times until they color up. When plants get 10 inches tall, support them with a stake.

**Landscape use and Planting:** Kale is used as bedding plants for color and landscape contrast. They can be planted in between other plants for a change in the landscape. Kale performs best when set out in full sun in early October through November, and planted 10 to 12 inches apart. Flowering starts in late fall and continues through winter as long as daytime air temperatures stay above 40° F and seldom reach 80° F.

The thought of fall annuals usually conjures up images of mums and perhaps pansies. Another often overlooked option is ornamental kale. Unlike most annuals planted in the garden through the growing season, ornamental kale thrives in cold weather. When the plants are acclimatized to the cold, they can withstand temperatures as low as five degrees Fahrenheit. Cold nights in October and November will actually intensify the typical blue-green outer leaves and brightly colored inner rosette typical of ornamental kale. These bright colors range from white, to pink, purple and even red.



**Fertilization:** Grow the plants quickly, using ample fertilizer and water. Stop fertilizing after the plants reach full size, or they won't color properly.

**Irrigation:** Irrigate regularly until the plants are ready for transplanting. Then continue to irrigate as necessary.

**Pest Management:** Pests that are common to cabbage are also common to kale. Some of the pests found on kale are cabbage loopers, webworms, diamondback moth, harlequin bugs, imported cabbage worms.

**Sources:** Kale can be found in most garden catalogs and garden centers. When purchasing ornamental kale, be selective. To maximize their lifespan in your fall landscape, look for plants that are not root bound or otherwise overgrowing their container. Choosing plants that are on the small side or appropriately sized for their container gives plants a great start and increases their chances of surviving well past the first frosts in the garden. Sometimes ornamental kale is sold under the name "ornamental cabbage" which is not really correct. While both are brightly colored, ornamental cabbage will form a head just like edible cabbage and has broad smooth leaves, whereas ornamental kale will not form a head, and has deeply dissected, ruffled leaves.