

Kale and Collards

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Kale and collards are two of the easiest vegetables to grow, and they are delicious to eat. They are both members of the cabbage family (Cruciferae), along with broccoli, Brussels sprouts, mustard and other vegetables. They are two of the oldest known cultivated vegetables, having been grown by the Romans and Greeks over 2000 years ago. Collards were thought to be good for the digestion, and Julius Caesar ate them before big banquets. The Romans or the Celts took them to the rest of Europe, and from there, they spread to America with the colonists. They were grown extensively in the South and are still popular in southern cooking. Food historians believe that collards were one of the main reasons that southern Blacks were so healthy. Ounce for ounce, collards and kale are the richest in vitamins and minerals of any vegetable, and they are low in calories and fat. Some recent research shows that they may help prevent some types of cancer.

Collards and kale tolerate almost any kind of weather, even winter temperatures down to 5° F. Cold makes them sweeter by converting starches in the leaves to sugar, but they may become somewhat bitter in hot weather. If you want to start them by seed, late August is a good time; the plants can be set out in September and October along with broccoli, lettuce, peas and other winter vegetables. Set the plants about 18 inches apart; they get big. They prefer lots of organic matter in the soil, a slightly low pH (about 6), plenty of fertilizer and full sun.

The leaves can be harvested in about 2 months when they are about 10-18 inches long. It's best to pick a few leaves off of each plant, and it will keep producing more for many months. The plants will bolt in the spring and summer, but this doesn't seem to hurt the flavor of the leaves. Aphids, cabbage worms and birds may want to share your collards and kale with you; insecticidal soap kills aphids and is very safe to use, or you can wash them off with a blast of water. The cabbage worms should be hand picked. The ornamental kale with the ruffled leaves and white or purple center is easy to grow, decorative and good to eat.

Collards and kale may be substituted for spinach in some recipes, but they have to be cooked 15-20 minutes rather than 30-60 seconds. Spinach turns to green mush if you cook it more than one minute, but kale and collards have a good texture and none of the bitterness of spinach and some other greens. The stems are very tough and should be removed before cooking. Some types of kale are good raw if you harvest the leaves when they are small. There are lots of great recipes available on the internet.

Learn more about growing collards and kale and other vegetables at the Saturday, August 4th Master Gardener class on "Fall and Winter Vegetables." This free three-hour class starts at 9:00 a.m. and is held in the Veterans Memorial Building, 130 Placerville Dr., in Placerville.

Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome. The office is located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at http://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at <http://ucanr.edu/mgenews/>. You can also find us on Facebook.

Do you have 1-gallon plant containers to recycle? Master Gardeners will gladly take them at the Master Gardener Office. Call before dropping them off and thank you for the donation.