

Kale: Simple Name for Multi-use Plant

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Kale: the new “it” vegetable! And with good reason. Added to the landscape, this aristocratic plant contributes texture and deep color to complement any garden plot, and containers benefit from its lush foliage accents. With the beautiful leaves providing earthy flavor and big nutritional value for fewer calories than most vegetables, what’s not to like?

Kale's varied uses in the kitchen range from using very young leaves fresh in salads, slaws or smoothies; sautéing more mature leaves with some olive oil and garlic for a side dish; tossing leaves into soups, stews, stir fries; or roasting or even baking leaves into a crispy kale chip snack. High in vitamins K, C, A, manganese, fiber, beta carotene, lutein, carotenoids, calcium and other minerals, kale could almost be called a super food.

Commonly available varieties include curly leaved (Scotch Kale), which is the most common supermarket and salad bar type; Cavolo nero (also known as black kale, Tuscan kale, Lacinato and dinosaur kale), which hails from Italy and has an oblong shape and deep bubbly leaves; and Red Russian kale, which resembles oak leaves in a soft sage color with red vining and a mild, sweet flavor.

A member of the brassica family, kale enjoys cool weather. Spring, fall and winter are good times to grow it because it thrives in the cooler soil. A light frost actually enhances kale’s flavor. This hardy vegetable can overwinter in many areas.

Plant kale in midsummer, six to eight weeks before the first frost, for fall harvest when lettuce, garlic or onion beds are freed up. Optimal soil temperature is 60 to 65 degrees. Hot weather makes kale turn bitter. Kale grows best in full sun but will tolerate partial shade. Fewer than six hours of sun daily will reduce the stocky, leafy nature of the plant, but the leaves are still perfectly edible.

Soil pH should be 5.5 to 6.8. Enrich soil with compost and fertilizer before setting out seeds. Plant seeds every 1 to 2 inches in shallow furrows that are 6 to 12 inches apart. Cover with ½ inch of soil, and don’t let the seeds dry out during germination. Thin to 6 inches apart once the plants are several inches tall. You may want to increase space between plants as they grow.

If you prefer to plant starts you have grown or purchased directly into the garden, space them 6-12 inches apart. The leaves will grow bigger with ample space than if crowded together, but smaller leaves tend to be more tender. It’s your call.

Water transplants well and apply fertilizer. Mulch with compost to keep the soil cool and moist and to reduce weeding. Kale likes an even supply of water, about 1.5 inches per week. Get out

the rain gauge if you need to. Moist soil helps keep leaves sweet and crisp rather than tough and bitter. Side dress during the growing season with more compost or fish emulsion every 3 to 4 weeks.



Right: Curly leaved kale, **Center:** Dinosaur kale, **Left:** Red Russian kale. **Photos by Christine Farrow / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners**

Kale takes about 60 days to fully mature. Harvest by removing the outer leaves first to allow the center of the plant to keep producing.

Kale is relatively pest free, but it can be susceptible to black rot or club root as well as aphids, cabbage loopers, cabbageworm, cutworms and flea beetles. The best defense is to provide good growing conditions to keep the plants healthy.

After harvesting, clean kale by submerging leaves in cool water for 10 to 15 minutes, rotating leaves through the water 2 or 3 times to ensure all surfaces get covered. This should help get the dirt out from all the crevices and wrinkles in the leaves. Remove the leaves from the water and rinse.

Cut off the stem by slicing on each end of the main stalk using scissors or a knife. Some people cook the tough stems separately, but most just compost them. Spin or blot the leaves dry with a soft towel. Store kale in the refrigerator in a sealed plastic storage bag with as much air removed as possible. Kale can retain its crispy quality for a week or two, but the longer it is stored, the more bitter it becomes.

Bitterness can be a problem, especially when using kale in its raw form. To reduce bitterness for salads, add some kosher salt, olive oil and lemon juice to raw kale and massage this mixture for 3 to 5 minutes. Don't be shy! Use your best bread-kneading technique. This procedure will break down the cellulose without heating the vegetable. The leaves will darken and shrink considerably and the taste will change. Taking a bite periodically will determine if the flavor is right for you.

Tasty to your palate, healthy for your body and beautiful to your eyes, kale is a colorful, robust, hearty and easy-to-grow vegetable to add to your garden and your table.