

Growing Your Own

A beginner's guide to gardening

Cabbage

Cabbage is a cool-season crop that is rich in vitamins. In Kentucky, it can grow from March to December. Cabbage can be eaten raw or cooked.

Varieties

Cabbage leaves can be green or purple (sometimes called red). Most types have smooth leaves, but savoy types have wrinkled leaves. Cabbage heads can be round, flattened, or pointed. When fully grown, they weigh from 1.5 pounds to more than six pounds, depending on the variety. “Days to harvest,” or DTH, usually means the number of days from the time of transplant into the garden until ready to pick.

- **Caraflex** (68 DTH) has a pointed, miniature cabbage head. The variety is tender and sweet for summer slaws and salads.
- **Dynamo** (70 DTH) is a compact, blue-green cabbage. It is good for planting in the spring because it is heat tolerant.
- **Famosa** (81 DTH) has ruffled leaves (savoy) that are tender and sweet for cooking.
- **Farao** (65 DTH) is a deep-green cabbage with crisp, peppery-sweet leaves.
- **Red Express** (60 DTH) is a compact, red cabbage that can be planted as close as eight inches apart.



Caraflex
Johnny's Selected Seeds



Dynamo
All-America Selections



Famosa
Johnny's Selected Seeds



Red Express
University of Kentucky CSA



Bilko
Johnny's Selected Seeds



Black Summer
Johnny's Selected Seeds



Joi-Choi
Johnny's Selected Seeds

Chinese cabbage types include napa and pak choi (bok choy). They often grow more upright rather than making a round head. They are good for a quick spring harvest. Their sweet leaves are tender and ready to pick a week or two earlier than head cabbages.

- **Bilko** (54 DTH) is a napa cabbage that grows quickly with light-green leaves.
- **Black Summer** (45 DTH) is a pak choi variety with light-green stems and dark-green leaves.
- **Joi-Choi** (50 DTH) is a strong, white-stemmed pak choi.

How much to plant

You can harvest about 15 pounds of cabbage from a 10-foot row. Plant three to four plants for a single person, or 12 to 15 cabbage for a family of four.

How and when to plant

You can grow cabbage in Kentucky from late February or March to December. Cabbage tastes better if it matures during cooler times of the year. In the spring, grow varieties with fewer “days to harvest,” or DTH, so that they mature before the hot days of summer. In midsummer, plant varieties with longer days to harvest so they will grow into the fall season and mature while the weather is cool.

Before planting, add fertilizer if you haven’t already done so. See the UK Cooperative Extension publication [*Home Vegetable Gardening in Kentucky \(ID-128\)*](#) for more information.

Cabbage Transplanting

Rows 30 inches apart

Transplant Spacing 9–18 inches apart

Safe Planting Dates

Spring

Fall

Eastern Kentucky March 15–April 30 July 1–Aug. 5

Central Kentucky March 1–April 15 July 7–Aug. 15

Western Kentucky Feb. 21–April 8 July 15–Aug. 21

To direct seed or start transplants indoors, plant seeds 2–4 weeks before these dates.

Seed Depth 1/4 inches

You can buy cabbage transplants at a local store or grow your own. Plant your first cabbage transplants in the garden in late February or March for a May harvest. You can plant cabbage again in midsummer for a fall crop. Space plants from 9 to 18 inches apart in the row, depending on the variety. Space varieties with smaller heads closer together, while those with larger heads should be spaced farther apart. Rows are usually 30 inches apart.

If growing your own transplants, plant the seeds inside about a month before you want to transplant outside. Plant the small seeds only a quarter inch deep. You can direct seed pak choi in the fall two to four weeks before the transplant dates (see Cabbage Transplanting chart).

Pests and diseases

The main insect pests of cabbage are caterpillars and flea beetles. A fine mesh covering over cabbage transplants will keep out most pests. You can buy insect netting or use tulle mesh from a fabric store. Drape mesh over simple wire arches or short poles to hold the netting over the plants. Secure the netting to the ground. Remember to look under the covering weekly to check plants for problems.

Flea beetles are small black insects that make tiny pinholes in leaves when they eat. If you find large holes in leaves, look for small green caterpillars under the leaves or in the center of the plant. Cabbage loopers and imported cabbageworms are the main caterpillars that eat cabbage leaves or burrow into the head. Remove caterpillars by hand or cut off leaves with large numbers of caterpillars. Please see UK Cooperative Extension publication *Home Vegetable Gardening in Kentucky* (ID-128) at <https://publications.ca.uky.edu/id-128> or contact your Extension agent for more information on dealing with pests.



Insect mesh or tulle can protect plants from certain insect pests.
University of Kentucky CSA



Flea beetles feeding on a leaf

Whitney Cranshaw, Colorado State University, Bugwood.org, CC BY 3.0



Leaves damaged by cabbageworms

Whitney Cranshaw, Colorado State University, Bugwood.org, CC BY 3.0



Cabbage looper on a leaf

Gerald Holmes, Strawberry Center, Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, Bugwood.org, CC BY-NC 3.0



Imported cabbageworms on a leaf. The small dots around them are their excrement. If you find this on the leaves then you should look for worms.

Whitney Cranshaw, Colorado State University, Bugwood.org, CC BY 3.0

Harvesting

Cut heads of cabbage when they are firm and grown to the proper size for the variety. Use a sharp knife to cut at the base, close to the ground. Remove the loose outer leaves, called wrapper leaves. Uncut cabbage can stay in the garden for a couple of weeks after reaching full size. If you notice mature cabbage heads splitting open, harvest and use them as soon as possible. In the fall, cabbages can stay in the garden longer, so you can harvest only what you need. A light frost may make them taste sweeter. Many varieties of cabbage can survive temperatures down to 20 degrees F. If temperatures are expected to drop below 20 degrees F, harvest any remaining heads.



Cabbage plants ready to harvest
University of Kentucky CSA



Savoy cabbage before trimming
University of Kentucky CSA



Savoy cabbage after trimming
University of Kentucky CSA

Serving

Cabbage is low in fat and calories and rich in vitamin A. It is used in almost every cuisine, from Mexican to Eastern European and Asian foods. Discard outer leaves and the core before preparing. Cabbage is good in slaws and salads. It can also be boiled, roasted, baked, steamed, braised, or fried. Cabbage is often pickled, such as German sauerkraut, Haitian pikliz, or Korean kimchi.

Storing

Cabbage heads can be kept in the refrigerator for two weeks to a month. Pickling is another way to preserve cabbage.

Clean up

After you finish harvesting, remove any remaining plants. Compost healthy plant material. Throw away any diseased plants.



Summary

Varieties

There are many cabbages that grow well in Kentucky. Some recommended varieties are Caraflex, Dynamo, Famosa, Red Express, Bilko napa cabbage, and Black Summer pak choi.

How much to plant

Plant three to four plants for a single person, or 12 to 15 plants for a family of four.

How and when to plant

You can grow cabbage in Kentucky from March to December. Put your first cabbage transplants in the garden in March for a May harvest. You can plant again in midsummer for a fall crop. Space them 9 to 18 inches apart. Varieties with smaller heads can be planted closer together, while those with larger heads should be spaced farther apart. Rows are usually 30 inches apart.

Pests and diseases

A fine mesh covering over cabbage transplants will keep out many pests. Drape fabric over simple wire arches or other poles to hold the netting over the plants. Secure fabric to the ground and leave in place until harvest.

Watch for small green caterpillars, such as cabbage loopers and imported cabbageworms, under the leaves or in the center. You can remove these by hand, cut off leaves with large numbers of caterpillars, or apply pesticides.

Harvesting

Cut heads of cabbage when they are firm and grown to the proper size for the variety. Use a sharp knife to cut at the base, close to the ground. Remove the loose outer leaves, called wrapper leaves.

Serving

Cabbage is low in fat and calories and is rich in vitamin A. Discard outer leaves and the core before preparing. Cabbage is good in slaws and salads. It can also be boiled, roasted, baked, steamed, braised, fried, or pickled.

Storing

Cabbage heads will keep in the refrigerator for two weeks to a month.

Clean up

After you finish harvesting, remove any remaining plants. Compost healthy plant material. Throw away any diseased plants.

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