



TOP LEFT Wash outer leaves and set aside for wraps. BELOW A purple-veined leaf from a January King 'Robin' cabbage. TOP RIGHT Savoy type 'Endeavour' in the snow. OPPOSITE PAGE Colourful and tasty brassicas rate as some of nature's top superfoods.



# Cabbages

Be inspired to grow and cook delicious fresh veg with our new cookery series. This month, the harvest revolves around a beautiful crop of winter brassicas

PHOTOGRAPHS MICHELLE GARRETT WORDS JACKY HOBBS

**T**he cabbage patch need not be a dowdily dressed, die-hard corner of the winter garden, but an exciting space, burgeoning with colour, glamour and flavour. It may be freezing cold outside, but brassicas are bearing up beautifully, both edible and the so-called ornamentals. It is with the latter that breakthrough work is almost complete on a new generation, which will combine the best of both looks and taste.

Recently, a great new variety called 'Fizz' was launched, with more to come later this year and next year. Tozer seeds are finessing a breeding programme that combines the most attractive elements of ornamental cabbages with edibles - look out for these brand-new hybrids with filigree foliage, delicately ruffled and stained in pinks, eau de nil and lilacs. Delicious and decorative, they will make fabulous crisp salads and beautiful garnishes (you can actually eat young ornamental leaves, but they grow bitter with age).

Cabbage varieties can be selected to produce a year-round supply, but the ones adorning the oft-desolate winter garden top my list. For beauty, you can't beat the puckered, almost floral, emerald rosettes of Savoy cabbage 'Endeavour'; though its purple-stained brother January King 'Robin' is also quite handsome, with its colouring tending to deepen with the cold. Both are equally welcome in the winter kitchen, ▶



Expert advice

DR JAMIE CLAXTON OF TOZER SEEDS SAYS:

- **Keep plants free of dead leaves** and weeds, and space well.
- **Feed to support** summer growth with seaweed extract.
- **Employ 1:3 year crop rotation** to minimise soil pests and disease.
- **Plant in deeply dug**, well-manured soil, pH 6.5-7.5, and add lime if applicable.

FOR PERFECT CROPS

Watch out for pests and diseases, particularly in the roots.

**CLUBROOT:** A fungus causing stunted growth and wilt. Combat by selecting new, resistant varieties. If stricken, destroy all brassicas and plant anew elsewhere.

**CABBAGE ROOT FLY:** Larvae devour brassica roots, devastating your crop. Control by placing collars around bases of young cabbages.

**APHIDS AND WHITEFLY:** Wash healthy plants in soapy water, and encourage natural pest control such as ladybirds, or repel them with citrus and garlic extracts.

**CATERPILLARS:** Those of the cabbage white can be dealt with by handpicking or using nematode action such as 'Just Caterpillar'.

**BIRDS:** Protect crops with netting, Agroguard or Enviromesh, net curtains or chicken wire (this will also inhibit egg-laying butterflies, but prohibit handy aphid eaters). Hanging old compact disks scares birds too. Chicken wire will also guard against snow crushing a crop.



ABOVE Jacky wheels home the harvest. RIGHT Use young edible leaves of ornamental cabbages for cooking. FAR RIGHT Decorate the dining table with colourful varieties. BELOW LEFT Choice Savoy cabbage 'Endeavour'.

and readily preserved in nature's own cold store. Hardy in freezing temperatures and snow, these slightly pungent plants can be decorative outdoors until moments before cooking. Plant alongside the exotic plumes of black cabbage Cavalo Nero, the flavour of which is actually said to improve after a frosting, and throw in a few ornamentals for decoration, creating a colourful, tasty pick-and-mix winter kitchen cabbage patch.

Brassicas are classified as a superfood, bursting with vitamin B, foliates, iron and fibre; but texture, taste and goodness can be ruined by overcooking, reducing crunchy, flavoursome leaves to waterlogged slime. Cabbage doesn't have to be boiled within an inch of its life; crinoulous, crunchy foliage can be swiftly stir-fried, served crisp and raw, or briefly blanched, stuffed and steamed.

The best thing about growing your own cabbage is being able to select the prettiest, most unusual leaves for garnishing, or to use larger ones as a receptacle for a finished dish. Baby leaves make great stir fries, while big leaves with deep colour and crevices are best for wraps and parcels. Red cabbage is a steadfast winter warmer when coupled with mulled red wine and dried fruits; pickle or bottle any surplus to avoid it being wasted when frosts strike.

Inspired by the astonishing vegetable gardens at Villandry, in which ornamental and edibles combine in stunning winter parterres, I always plant alternating, rose-like, pink and purple ornamentals in pots to use in seasonal table settings, or I snip them for individual napkin or place settings when little else is readily available in the garden.



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Sowing & growing

WINTER CABBAGES

Sow April or May outdoors directly into finely prepared seed beds, 2cm deep and 15cm apart, or into modules (thin to one per module) and water well. Eight weeks later, transplant seedlings into firm main beds, rich in organic matter and erring on the alkaline side, lime if necessary (pH 6.5-7.5), leaving ample space for spreading girths, approximately 50-60cm apart. Harvest from October through to March. Sow ornamentals as you would winter cabbages.

SPRING CABBAGES

Sow seeds July through to August and follow as above, but transplant slightly closer together. Harvest from April.

SUMMER CABBAGES

Sow outdoors from March to May or January to February under glass. Transplant eight weeks later for harvesting from June onwards.



Recipe: Savoy wraps

Savoy cabbage leaves make the best wraps. Choose darker, more textured outer leaves to wrap around a variety of fillings. Blanch leaves in boiling water for two minutes to render them pliable. Then fill, tuck and roll leaves and tie with string before steaming for five or six minutes (as thicker leaves may need a little longer). Serve as a starter, a main dish or a vegetable accompaniment.

The following will make fillings for about eight wraps each:

PORK AND PEANUT:

- In a food processor, blitz together 250g cooked lean minced pork, one diced red pepper, two tablespoons of peanuts, one tablespoon soy sauce and one tablespoon chopped fresh thyme.
- Season with salt and pepper.
- Use soy sauce for dipping.

CHICKEN AND CHILLI:

- Blitz together two cooked chicken breasts, two chopped chillies, a crushed clove of garlic, a small tin of water chestnuts and one tablespoon of chopped fresh coriander and season to taste.
- Use a sweet chilli sauce for dipping.

MUSHROOM WRAP:

- In a frying pan, melt 15g butter and sizzle one finely chopped medium-sized shallot with 200g of chopped mushrooms (use different varieties for interesting flavour variations).
- Cook briskly for two minutes, add a splash of lemon juice, one tablespoon of double cream or crème fraiche, and a tablespoon of freshly chopped parsley.
- Season to taste.