

# ORIENTAL EXPRESS

Pak choi is a speedy and rewarding crop with a number of culinary uses. **Holly Farrell** looks at the results of the 2010 RHS trial. Photography by Tim Sandall

**PLANTING OUT** Whether sown direct, or in modules and transplanted (below), pak choi must be well watered from sowing to harvest

**ONE OF THE MORE** familiar Oriental vegetables available in shops pak choi, *Brassica rapa* (Chinensis Group), is becoming increasingly popular with gardeners as an alternative to cabbage. Also known as bok choy and celery mustard, it has a juicy, crisp texture and mild flavour, and can be eaten raw in salads or cooked, the leaves stir-fried or whole heads steamed. Pak choi is not difficult to grow, provided a few simple rules are observed to avoid its common problems of poor germination and bolting (running to seed).

Growing best in an open, sunny site, pak choi will also tolerate light shade in midsummer. It is a fast-growing crop and needs fertile soil of neutral to slightly alkaline pH to sustain its growth. Adding plenty of organic matter to the soil both before planting and as a mulch will aid moisture retention, which is crucial for pak

choi to grow well (see box, below). Seeds can be sown direct into soil from April to August, or into modules for subsequent transplanting. Sowings before June are more likely to bolt, and pak choi prefers a constant temperature from germination to harvest. Once the soil temperature has reached 10–13°C (50–55°F), sow 2cm (¾in) deep, allowing 45cm (18in) between rows. The space between seeds within the row depends on the ultimate size of the cultivar – check the seed packet – and how it is to be cropped, but 10cm (4in) between plants is usually sufficient.

Plant out module-sown plants to this spacing after all risk of frost has passed and the seedlings are well established. Ensure young plants are watered well to avoid stressing them in dry soil. If you sow in a drill and later thin the seedlings to the correct spacing, you can use the thinnings as salad leaves.

## CHALLENGES IN CULTIVATION

There are two main problems when growing pak choi: poor germination and bolting. However, both are easily avoided by sowing the seed at the right time. Pak choi will not germinate well in hot, dry conditions, and any resulting plants are more likely to bolt because of the stress they endured while young. Heat and drought also encourage bolting in older plants, so preventing the soil drying out is crucial at every stage of plant growth.

Pak choi is best sown from July to September to replace earlier crops such as peas, broad beans or early potatoes. Sowing in modules under glass was found to improve germination rates during the RHS trial. Choosing the appropriate cultivar can also help: in general, the green-stemmed cultivars are better for early sowings as they are less likely to bolt. White-stemmed cultivars (such as 'Prize') have been bred in the cooler parts of China – rather than Japan – which means bolt-resistance is not a high priority for plant breeders. Cultivars with better germination rates in the trial included 'Red Choi' and 'Rubi Shine'. However, all is not lost if the plants do bolt: the young flowering shoots are edible if picked before the buds open.



RHS TRIALS

## AWARD WINNERS

Pak choi given the Award of Garden Merit in the 2010 trial at RHS Garden Wisley:

- 'Red Choi' 1
- 'Natsu Taiko' (award subject to confirmation of availability) 2
- 'Summer Breeze' 3
- 'Choko' 4
- 'Ivory' 5
- 'Baraku' 6
- 'Glacier' 7

Pak choi can be harvested as cut-and-come-again leaves, seedlings and young plants. From sowing the seed to picking leaves can take as little as six weeks, but pak choi will need 10 weeks if cutting the whole head. Best eaten as baby vegetables, harvest plants when they are around 15–20cm (6–8in) tall. Leaving a stump to resprout will give further pickings for between two and six weeks. As with Swiss chard, older leaves can become bitter in taste.

Plants require protection from frost, so the last successional sowing should be made six to 10 weeks before the first frost is expected. However, under cover

of a polythene tunnel, pak choi is a useful winter vegetable and will grow happily in midwinter and early spring at a temperature of 10°C (50°F). It is advisable to cover plants with fleece or mesh to prevent damage from common brassica pests (see RHS Advice, pp418).

### Trial results

The first trial of pak choi at RHS Garden Wisley, held in 2010, demonstrated 23 different cultivars, of which seven were given the Award of Garden Merit (AGM). The crops were assessed on their taste, size, hearting, uniformity and yield, as well as their resistance to

bolting. Of the AGM winners, 'Choko', 'Summer Breeze' and 'Ivory' had good germination rates and showed little susceptibility to bolting. All three cultivars are upright with tender leaves and stems, and form good hearts, but 'Ivory' has pure white stems compared with the green of the other two. 'Red Choi' also produced a good, uniform crop of tender plants and its leaves are an attractive purple on a green stem. Pak choi 'Natsu Taiko' was recommended for AGM status subject to it becoming available to gardeners, and two recently named cultivars 'Baraku' and 'Glacier' (which appeared in the Wisley trial as

'TZ 9230') also gained the AGM.

One of the more ornamental brassica crops, pak choi is also one of the most useful. It has a wide range of culinary uses at every stage of its growth, and is regarded as nutritionally rich in vitamins and minerals. More than just a gap-filler in the vegetable garden, it is an invaluable crop for late summer into late autumn that deserves to be lifted out of the 'exotic' category and into the vegetable garden mainstays. ■

Holly Farrell trained at RHS Garden Wisley and is now head gardener on a private estate

@ [www.rhs.org.uk](http://www.rhs.org.uk)  
For more on the 2010 RHS trial, search for 'pak choi trial' on the RHS homepage.  
● For more on growing oriental vegetables, visit [www.rhs.org.uk/growyourown](http://www.rhs.org.uk/growyourown)