

What's new in brassicas

Colourful new brassica cultivars are bringing novel tastes and textures to our tables, with more selections due soon

Author: **Sue Stickland**, garden writer, has a special interest in vegetables. Photography: **Tim Sandall**

Brassicas, thankfully, are losing their staid image at last. Brussels sprouts, broccoli, winter kales, cauliflowers and cabbages are stalwarts of traditional allotments and vegetable plots, but new selections – and new ways of growing them – can suit small gardens, adventurous gardeners and gourmet tastes.

Kales are usually grown as large plants, sown in April or May for use as winter and spring greens, occupying ground for more than half a year. A more productive and versatile option is to space the plants closer and harvest them when small. Tender, baby leaves (5–7.5cm/2–3in long) can be added raw to salads; half-sized ‘teen’ leaves (20–22cm/8–9in long) are delicious steamed or stir fried.

Such leaves can be harvested for a large part of the year (mid-spring to early autumn) after successional sowings, even from small plots or large containers, and the baby leaves crop after only about six weeks in summer. Although any kales can be cropped in this way, cultivars such as old ‘Pentland Brig’ and new ‘Fizz’ have sweet, tender and attractive young leaves, and more are under trial (see panel opposite).

New hybrids

Although markedly different from each other in appearance, in fact all brassica crops are selections of the

same species (*Brassica oleracea*). Recent crosses between them have made hybrids heralded as ‘new veg’. The ‘flower sprout’, for example, has various kales and Brussels sprouts as parents. Introduced in 2010, ‘Petit Posy’ has the stature of a sprout, but the buttons are open, frilly and colourful – mild in flavour, easy to harvest and quick to cook. From sowings March–mid-May, ‘Petit Posy’ can be harvested October–March; it is proving popular and additional cultivars should soon be available.

Similarly, crosses between European calabrese and Chinese broccoli (Kailaan) have given a versatile vegetable where sweet, succulent flower stems are as much part of the edible harvest as the green head. Initially this vegetable was trademarked ‘Tenderstem’ for sale in supermarkets, but more recent cultivars such as ‘Apollo’ and ‘Atlantis’ are often called ‘brokali’ in catalogues. The main head is cut at ping-pong ball size; and then thick-stalked side shoots at 15–18cm (6–8in) long are produced over a period of up to two months. They are suited to steaming, stir frying and even eating raw in salads or pickling.

Brokali cultivars currently available to gardeners have a growing season similar to calabrese (sown March–June, or February under cover, and harvested June–October) but developers Proveg Seeds promise a new, hardier hybrid that could overwinter.

Colour and taste

Flavour and colour are priorities in modern breeding programmes, so bitter Brussels, insipid cabbage and unappetising grey cauliflowers should be history. Cabbages bred for shredding into supermarket salad packs must be eye-catching and sweet, leading to pointed red cabbages such as ‘Kalibos’ (sown indoors mid-Jan to mid-March, or outdoors March–May; crops from July to October). It not only breaks from tradition on looks but is delicious raw.

Cauliflowers also have a new look, with modern cultivars that have smooth, dense, brightly coloured curds – in vivid lime green, deep purple or, most recently, orange. They look intriguing when used as crudité or in salad. Plants are usually more compact than traditional green or purple coloured broccolis such as ‘Purple Cape’ – bright purple ‘Graffiti’ (AGM) is sometimes suggested for



Coming soon? Appetising strains of *Brassica oleracea* (above) are being used in the development of delicious new cultivars for use as young leaves and to extend the cropping season.

container growing, for example, and if orange ‘Sunset’ is grown as a ‘mini-cauli’ its colour is intensified.

Extending the season

Purple sprouting broccoli is valuable as an early spring vegetable, but new cultivars give it a longer season and allow reliable harvests even in areas with harsh winters. A recent example, British-bred ‘Summer Purple’, needs no winter chill to initiate its flower buds. Traditional cultivars occupy space for seven to eight months, but ‘Summer Purple’ can crop in as little as 12–14 weeks (by June, from sowings in early February).

Similarly, ‘spring’ greens can also

be produced in summer and autumn as a quick-growing, space-saving alternative to large-headed cabbages. Cultivars such as ‘Duncan’, with leaves closely packed at their base, are often recommended for growing in this way. Sown from February to October, they crop as tender green leaves from June through to March, in conditions in which headed cultivars would struggle – and they don’t leave you with half a cabbage languishing in the fridge.

Recent developments in brassicas may have been led by supermarkets’ needs, but gardeners have benefited too, with new crops and cultivars to satisfy more situations and tastes. ●

Future foods on trial at Tozer Seeds

Vegetable crops are continually being bred, improved and trialled by seedsmen. One such company, Tozer Seeds, based in Surrey, is developing new brassica selections suitable for supermarket ‘wash and cook’ packs, and this should lead to attractive new garden cultivars, too. Some are expected to be available during 2014. A starting point was to cross ornamental cabbages (decorative but unpalatable) with kales, but some of the strains on trial also have other brassicas such as broccoli in their parentage.

Grown where they are sown

On the trials field (below), a patchwork of different leaves is sown at various densities to assess the best plant spacing for sweet and tender half-size or ‘teen’ leaves that need only light cooking. Unlike brassicas that are left to fully mature, these new selections can be sown as close as 8–10cm (3–4in) apart. There is no need to transplant or thin seedlings, and they are harvested where they have been sown. The young leaves must be attractive, so breeders are looking at their texture and colour as well as taste, and also at frost hardiness and uniformity.



SUPPLIERS

❖ **Tozer Seeds** only supply wholesale quantities. Seed of the named vegetables described in this article is available from (see below for codes):

Kale: ‘Fizz’: A, B, F; ‘Pentland Brig’: A.
Broccoli: ‘Tenderstem’: A, E.
Brokali: ‘Apollo’: B, E, D, F, G, H; ‘Atlantis’: A.
Red cabbage: ‘Kalibos’: B, C, D, H.
Cauliflower: ‘Graffiti’: A, C, D, E, F; ‘Sunset’: A, C.
Sprouting broccoli: ‘Summer Purple’: C, D, E, F, G.
Brokoli (marketed as FlowerSprout): ‘Petit Posy’: A, B, F, G.
Spring green: ‘Duncan’: D.

Supplier details:
A: DT Brown 0845 371 0532; **B:** Dobies 0844 701 7625; **C:** Kings Seeds 01376 570000; **D:** Marshalls 0844 557 6700; **E:** Mr Fothergill’s 0845 371 0518; **F:** Suttons Seeds 0844 922 2899; **G:** Thompson & Morgan 0844 248 5383; **H:** Unwins 0844 573 8400.



Kale selections are ready to pick as baby leaves just six weeks after broadcast sowing.



Seed companies are hoping to introduce cabbages that are both tasty and ornamental.



There is no need to protect the curds of Cauliflower ‘Graffiti’ as light deepens its colour.

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