

BROCCOLI – WHICH VARIETIES TO GROW

Some brassicas may be tricky, but there is a broccoli to suit every garden

Growing brassicas, the cabbage family, is often seen as too difficult, the preserve of committed veg growers, but if you've even a small veg patch you can have a go.

Cabbages and sprouts are none too popular with shoppers simply because, despite appearances, they don't keep well after harvesting and are often either tasteless or leave a rank, mustardy flavour in your mouth. They lose their wonderful, fresh nutty flavour and are an offput.

Cauliflower is difficult to grow well, but broccoli is another matter. Broccoli, first developed in Italy, was made popular in the UK in the 18th Century by the London seedsman, Stephen Switzer, and the word, literally meaning 'little sprouts or shoots', was used to describe the mass of little flowering spears produced by 'Purple Sprouting Broccoli'. During the 1960's and 1970's these little spears lost out to calabrese with consumers. Broccoli slipped into obscurity, disappeared from greengrocers's shelves and only a couple of varieties were grown by keen gardeners. Meanwhile, the large-headed calabrese ruled the roost. Neatly wrapped in cellophane, it became readily available in all the supermarkets, and became a common sight at the allotment. But fashions change. Like shop-bought cauliflower, calabrese is often pretty tasteless and is now being supplanted by very expensive, but reputedly tasty, broccoli spears.

Over the last few years, the new broccoli craze has hit our seed catalogues, as the large mail order firms tempt us with a dazzling array of varieties. 'Early White Sprouting White Eye' and 'White Sprouting' have added white to the colour range and, more importantly, there's a much longer harvesting season than the traditional 'Early' and 'Late' purple sprouting types offered. 'Summer Purple' can be harvested from July onwards, depending on the weather and sowing times.

It may be a problem that most broccolis occupy a plot for a full year, but this is usually the case with crops in Scottish gardens. Other brassicas, potatoes, onions and roots leave little growing time for anything else. You may be able to slip in a leaf or radish catch crop, but that's about it. A new broccoli, 'Spike', is less demanding: a May sowing will be ready by the end of autumn, so you'll get an early sugar pea harvest before planting. Another broccoli-type variety, 'Raab', matures in 40 days. It is distantly related to turnip and produces spears looking like broccoli, but with a more bitter flavour.

Perhaps because 'Raab' plants aren't actually broccoli, they take up very little space: 25cm apart in rows 40cm apart. With few exceptions, real broccoli is very hungry for space, needing 60cm between plants in rows 75cm apart. On the other hand, 2 or 3 plants will suffice for most families and you enjoy a harvest of tasty little spears over several weeks. A worthwhile option, in my opinion.

Like all the other brassicas, broccoli needs rich soil. Just before planting, I dig in home-made compost, one barrowload for a 10m² bed, but you'll also enjoy good results by spreading well rotted muck over the bed in the previous autumn. The manure largely breaks down over the winter and is dug in before planting.

I certainly wouldn't be without a few broccoli plants to enjoy in spring and autumn, but, unfortunately cabbage white caterpillars share my enthusiasm, and stopping them is costly. Although an expensive biological control is available, an alternative is insect or butterfly netting. It isn't cheap either, but is a one-off alternative that'll last for years. This fine mesh netting is surprisingly difficult to find at garden centres, but is readily available online. Fleece or the sturdier Enviromesh limits light and encourages weaker, softer growth, which is the last thing you want with brassicas.

Butterfly netting is much better, but mustn't touch the leaves, as the butterflies will sit on the net and lay eggs through it. Each of the large whites lays a few hundred eggs in batches of 10-20, so don't expect much greenery after that onslaught. Small whites lay one egg at a time but have a longer breeding season and cause as much damage as the larger ones. To protect the crop, improvise some kind of giant cloches

with galvanised tubing or wood. You'll need a 3 metre wide net to cover a 1 metre bed. I must confess to some quiet satisfaction when watching a cabbage white fluttering around the net for some minutes before sidling off to victims new.

Most broccoli varieties will cope with most Scottish winters in most parts of the country, but at 200 metres above sea level, my crop sometimes succumbs to the ravages of winter. I expect an Enviromesh cover would give enough protection, but I do find it easiest to use the polytunnel.

Even if you have to nurse your crop through the winter and protect it from butterflies, given the price of inferior broccoli in the shops, the delicious fresh taste is well worth the effort.