

KALE – HOW TO GROW THIS HARDY CROP

No Scots veg patch should be without Kail, our National Green Vegetable. This hardy specimen will stand up to any winter, staying tasty through autumn, winter and spring.

Kail, or kale, *Brassica oleracea* var. *acephala*, is steeped in history. It was a tonic for sick monks at Paisley Abbey and adorned the kail-wives' stalls at Edinburgh's Tron. Robert Ferguson [1637-1714] sets the scene. "If kail sae green, or herbs delight, Edina's street attracts the sight."

In his poem "Hallowe'en, Robert Burns delves deeper by bestowing magical properties on this seemingly humble plant.

*"Amang the bonnie winding banks
Where Doon rins wimplin' clear, ...
Some merry, friendly country-folks
Together did convene
To haud their Halloween."*

He then describes a Hallowe'en ceremony where all the young folk go into the kailyard blindfolded, and randomly pull a plant. Whether it's large, small, straight or crooked, will describe their future husband or wife. Good fortune will be forecast if some earth sticks to the roots. Everyone then eats the centre of the runt, or stem: it must be sweet and tender if the future partner is to be good-natured. So if you're looking for a partner, try your luck in the veg garden tomorrow night!

If you aren't growing any of these prophetic plants, why not start in the spring? 'Dwarf Green Curled' is probably the most reliably hardy and tasty kail variety. 'Ragged Jack' is a fine looking plant and a welcome addition to the potager, with a tall stem and purple-veined, deeply indented 'ragged' leaves. This heirloom Russian kail sits comfortably in an herbaceous border as well. It's a statuesque plant when allowed to flower and set seed, and makes an impressively large feature. I will resist the temptation to compile a lengthy list of other humble vegetables whose leaf, shape and spread make them worthy occupants of any border!

Heirloom varieties like Ragged Jack are slowly becoming more widely available, but Garden Organic's Heritage Seed Library [www.gardenorganic.org.uk] unquestionably has the best choice for gardeners. Members can select up to 6 varieties of vegetable from a catalogue every year. I discovered 'Asparagus Kail' many years ago, and have invariably grown it every year, saving seed to ensure a constant supply. This variety, with its flat, oval leaves and succulent, nutty flavour, comes into its own in the spring, so is a good foil to my autumn favourite, 'Dwarf Green Curled'. A larger specimen, 'Westfalian', is another one well worth growing.

Our ancestors ate kail all year round, but, fortunately, we're not so dependent on this healthy, green crop, and one sowing a year should suffice. April is the sowing time for most brassicas – cabbages, sprouts, cauliflowers and the rest – and kail should be included in the programme. An earlier sowing for all these varieties will bring them on too quickly with the risk of premature harvest, while a later sowing will result in small plants and a disappointing crop. The farming tradition in the Borders has been to 'put the garden in' after lambing, in May, but if you're not thirled to a lambing shed every night in April, go for an earlier sowing.

If you haven't grown any of the cabbage family before, this is a good one to start on. Unlike its cousins, it isn't a greedy feeder: sprouts, cabbages and especially cauliflowers require a lot of feed to produce heads, while kail gets away with loose leaves followed by small, perfectly edible broccoli-like flowering shoots. So you'll only need to fork in a couple of handfuls of compost round each planting hole. This undemanding plant will also tolerate much lighter, grittier soil than other brassicas, so, again, it's pretty trouble-free. The soil in the demonstration garden we developed was light and low in nutrients, so kail was the natural choice for brassicas.

I would never recommend growing large brassicas in containers, though you might get away with some of the smaller varieties of kale like Cavolo Nero, as you do need about 10 plants for a decent succession of pickings. Kail is not a candidate for a confined space unless you are only going to use the leaves in stir fries. If you have a large border, you could easily interplant enough kail to look good and fill a saucepan. When grown in a vegetable patch, space plants 45cm apart, with 60cm between the rows; 45cm each way if in raised beds. So kail takes up very little space compared to cauliflowers and is pickable over many weeks.

Yet another reason for growing kail is its relative immunity to attack by some brassica pests. A cabbage collar is an essential protection against root fly, but cabbage white butterflies always flit past without bothering to lay their destructive little eggs, so when you drape Enviromesh or insect net over other brassicas, you can ignore the kail.

If you would like to start growing kail, don't be discouraged by the attitude of 17th century Highlanders. They used nettles for greens and, after the Battle of Killcrankie in 1689, apparently described the Lowland Grants as 'effete' because they preferred kail.