

Growing Brussels sprouts for holiday harvest

Question: A client called the plant clinic this week and asked: What are the best techniques for growing great Brussels sprouts?



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Answer: Brussels sprouts (*Brassica oleracea* var. *gemmifera*) are a member of the cabbage family, Brassicaceae.

Brussels sprouts are descendants of the wild mustard that grew in the Mediterranean region during ancient times. The precursors to modern Brussels sprouts were developed in ancient Rome, but the sprouts we're familiar with today were first cultivated back in the 13th century, in what is now Belgium.

It is thought that the vegetable is named after the Belgian capital, Brussels, where they became a popular crop in the 16th century. French settlers introduced Brussels sprouts to the United States in the 1800s, planting them in Louisiana.

Brussels sprouts are hardy, slow-growing, long-season vegetables. They can be grown with success if planted in late summer for fall harvest. Most gardeners I know like the fall-harvested sprouts best!

Brussels sprouts are readily distinguished from all other varieties of brassicas by the sprouts or buds, like mini cabbages, grown on the stalk of a tall, leafy plant. They are equal in tenderness and flavor to cauliflower and broccoli.

Proper timing is needed in order to grow large mature plants, which then develop buds during fall weather. Direct sowing is not recommended. It is best to start plants in containers for transplanting in late August, or purchase transplant starts from your local garden shop.

Brussels sprouts prefer a fertile, well-drained soil, rich in organic matter. Like most vegetables, Brussels sprouts need a minimum of six hours of sunlight daily; more is better. Transplants should have four to six mature leaves and a well-developed root system before planting out.

Provide your Brussels sprouts with consistent and even water to keep the plants growing vigorously during the heat at the

end of summer. Without ample moisture, the crop will fail.

It is recommended to apply a high nitrogen, fast acting liquid fertilizer every couple of weeks after planting. Use shallow cultivation and mulches to control weeds.

As with all brassica vegetables, it is important to rotate your crop yearly.

Many gardeners top the plants (removing the apical meristem) to promote the growth of the sprouts once the plants have reached a height of 24 -36 inches. Do this when sprouts are present throughout the entire stalk and the bottom sprouts are at least ½ inch in diameter. This practice will mature the sprouts throughout the stalk so the entire plant can be harvested at once.

Other gardeners remove the lower leaves to expose the sprouts. Removing the lower leaves will accelerate sprout growth. The lower sprouts mature first. In this way you can harvest the sprouts as they develop along the stem without harvesting the entire plant. The sprouts just get sweeter as the weather gets cooler.

You may find you can harvest your Brussels sprouts through December in most of our areas in Douglas County.

A great idea to extend your harvest is to plant two to three different varieties that include early and late maturing sprouts. For example Franklin, Octia and Rubine are early varieties maturing in 80-100 days. Hestia, Nautic and Dimitri are later varieties maturing in 120-130 days.

There are some common problems to watch out for that plague gardeners trying to grow the perfect Brussels sprouts. The most common is trouble with aphids. Gardeners can control aphids with ladybugs or a hard spray of water. For larger infestations, gardeners may find applications



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of insecticidal soap or neem oils to be effective. Another strategy is to plant varieties of Brussels sprouts that mature later in the season when aphid populations are on the decline.

Cabbage worms can also be a problem on young plants. The first sign of cabbage worms will be off-white butterflies fluttering around your plants. They lay their yellowish colored eggs on the under sides of leaves, which hatch into caterpillars that can cause severe damage to your sprouts. Gardeners can

easily remove these caterpillars by hand if infestations are caught early.

To control larger infestations of cabbage worms it is recommended to apply a solution of Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis*). These products can be found in your local garden shop.

While Brussels sprouts have a reputation for being tricky to grow, it's quite possible to grow these tasty treats in the home garden if you simply give them what they need.

Home grown Brussels sprouts

can be a great addition to your holiday menu. Brussels sprouts are rich in calcium and iron and contain significant quantities of vitamins A and C.

Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu, 541-672-4461 or 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.