

COLLARDS

grow in the Umpqua Valley

Question: I remember, growing up, that my family always served collard greens on our Sunday dinner table. My grandmother grew them in her backyard. Growing up in a collard culture is filled with childhood memories that I will always cherish. Can I grow collards in my home garden in the Umpqua Valley?

Answer: Collards (*Brassica oleracea*) are in a group of brassicas referred to as the Acephala group, meaning without a head. A relative of cabbage, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, kohlrabi and kale, this upright, dark green, waxy plant is a little like a cabbage that doesn't make a head.

It is one of the oldest members of the cabbage family. Indeed the paddled-shaped collard leaves look like cabbage leaves that didn't have enough "oomph" to form a head. They are in fact a type of non-heading cabbage known as colewort.

The handsome, loose leaves are dark green or blue gray-green. They are a leafy, cool-weather vegetable, excellent for cooked greens. Collard plants are also known as the tree cabbage.

Collard greens date back to prehistoric times. The ancient Greeks grew kale and collards, although they made no distinction between them. Well before the Christian era, the Romans grew several varieties, including those with large leaves and stalks and a mild flavor.

The Romans may have taken collards to Britain and France or the Celts may have introduced them to these countries. They reached into the British Isles in the fourth century B.C.

Collards became a part of American agriculture when the first Africans arrived in Jamestown, Virginia, in the early 1600's and introduced the dark green leafy vegetable to America.

Collards have long been a popular vegetable in the south, but they're gaining popularity in other parts of the country as well. It is one of the most cold-hardy of all vegetables, able to withstand temperatures in the upper teens. In the Pacific Northwest, collards can provide a harvest throughout the entire winter.

Collards can be planted in the spring and fall, although collards planted in fall gardens are favored because the leaves are sweeter when



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Chris Rusch
Ask Master Gardener

touched by frost. You can start collard plants from seed or nursery transplants. For a fall harvest, plant in mid-summer, about six to eight weeks before the first fall frost date.

Collards are easy to plant. Space them 18-24 inches apart. Collards require a well-drained, loamy soil, relatively high in organic material, with a pH level of 6-6.5. Collards will grow well in raised beds, containers and in-ground gardens.

Collard greens prefer to grow in full sun but will tolerate some shade. A shady location may protect plants from sun scald during the summer months. Keep your plants well-watered.

Mulch will keep the soil moist and the leaves clean.

Harvest leaves when they are up to 10" long, dark green and still young. Old leaves may be tough or stringy. Pick the lower leaves first, working your way up the plant. Whole young plants may be cut as well.

With protection, you can harvest collard greens well into the winter. Remember to side dress your collards with composted manure or a slow-release fertilizer every four to six weeks to keep the plants growing through repeated harvests.

Here are some suggested varieties to try:

■ Vates and Georgia are traditional varieties.

If you want a steady supply of leaves, opt for these loose-leaf varieties. Vates is a compact plant with very smooth leaves. Georgia is a large plant with tender, waxy leaves, heat tolerant and slow to bolt. Both mature in 75 days.

■ Champion is a Vates hybrid, with cabbage-like leaves that store well. Good for smaller gardens, this variety matures in 60 days.

■ Flash is a smallish plant but a very vigorous grower. The leaves are smooth and sweet; the plant matures in 55 days.

Tree collards are a perennial vegetable and an essential part of the sustainable garden. For very little input they can provide an abundance of greens all year round and they will continue to grow and produce year after year.

Tree collards are hardy to about 20° F and in mild climates have been known to live for up to twenty years! They are closely related to other perennial collard varieties grown in the Mediterranean, Africa, the Americas, and other countries.

Today collards are appreciated for their historical, cultural and culinary contributions and are being cooked in a variety of inventive ways including in soups, casseroles and mixed with many other meats, seafood and vegetables. You may even toss tiny, tender young leaves into a salad for texture, color and added vitamins.

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



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