



Seed Savers EXCHANGE

How to Grow Cabbage (*Brassica oleracea*)

*Cabbage varieties come in a spectrum of colors, from light green to dark purple. The scientific name of cabbage is *Brassica oleracea*, a species that also includes broccoli, cauliflower, kale, and Brussels sprouts.*

Time of Planting: Sow cabbage seeds indoors 4-6 weeks before transplanting seedlings outdoors. Transplant cabbage seedlings outdoors just before the last frost.

Spacing Requirements: Sow seeds ¼ inch deep. Space cabbages at least 24-36 inches apart in even spacing or 12-14 inches apart in rows spaced 36-44 inches apart.

Time to Germination: 7-12 days.

Special Considerations: When growing for seed, increase spacing to 18-24 inches apart in rows that are at least 36 inches apart. Staking is recommended.

Common Pests and Diseases (and how to manage): Cabbage can suffer from a number of pests and diseases including flea beetles, cabbage moths, aphids, leaf miner bugs, slugs, and black rot. Early season insect pests, such as flea beetles, can be deterred by growing transplants underneath row cover.

Harvest (when and how): Cut the head at the base of the plant with a harvesting knife or pruning shears as soon as the cabbage head feels solid. Trim off the loose outer leaves and store heads in a cool place.

Eating: Raw cabbage can be used in fresh salads like coleslaw. It can also be enjoyed roasted, braised, stewed, and stir fried. Cabbage is often fermented to make sauerkraut and kimchi.

Storing: Cabbage will keep for about four months at a temperature between 32-40 degrees F and a relative humidity of 80-90%.

How to Save Cabbage Seeds

*Cabbage belongs to the *Brassica oleracea* species, which includes many other crop types, like broccoli, Brussels sprouts, and cauliflower. Because of this, isolation needs to be managed thoughtfully, but because most are biennials that will not flower until their second season, a gardener can grow multiple varieties for eating while simultaneously growing one variety for seed saving.*

Life Cycle: Biennial

Recommended Isolation Distance: Separate varieties by 800 feet - ½ mile.

Recommended Population Sizes: To ensure viable seeds, save seeds from at least 5 plants. When maintaining a variety over many generations, save seeds from 20-50 plants. If you're saving seeds for genetic preservation of a rare variety, save seeds from 80 plants.

Vernalization: To save seeds from cabbage, first decide how you will vernalize your plants. Vernalization can happen in the field or in storage. Overwinter cabbage in the field if you will have 10-12 weeks of cool weather (around 50 degrees F) without regular temperatures below 35 degrees F.

When plants cannot be successfully overwintered in the field, they can be vernalized in storage.

Before the first frost, dig up the entire plant, roots and all. Trim off outer leaves but keep the cabbage head intact. Replant these trimmed plants into containers filled with slightly moist potting mix or sand. Then, find a place to store your plants. The optimum storage conditions for cabbage vernalization ranges from 34-39 degrees F and 80-95% relative humidity. A traditional root cellar is ideal but garages, sheds, and other unheated structures work well in some climates.

In the spring, when the soil can be worked, replant cabbage in your garden. Space plants at least 36 inches apart. Staking the plants is recommended.

Assessing Seed Maturity: After flowering in their second year of growth, mature seed pods become dry and turn brown as the seeds inside also mature and brown. As with many of the brassica crops, the window of time for an optimal harvest may be short as mature pods will begin to shatter and bird predation can become a problem.

Harvesting: Seeds can be gathered by cutting entire branches or by harvesting whole plants. Because of this species' tendency to shatter, the harvested material should be placed on drop cloths or in containers to prevent seed loss.

Cleaning and Processing: Branches of mature fruits can be threshed by rubbing the pods between one's hands or by flailing the brittle pods against any surface that will cause fruits to break open. If the pods are dry, they will release their seeds easily when threshed.

Storage and Viability: Store cabbage seeds in a cool, dark, and dry place in an airtight container to keep out moisture and humidity. Properly stored cabbage seeds will remain viable for several years.

For more seed saving and gardening tips, visit:
seedsavers.org/learn