

How to Grow

Brussel Sprouts

The Brussel Sprout is a member of the *Gemmifera* cultivar group of cabbages, grown for its edible buds. In fact the name *Gemmifera* means Gemmiferous or "bud producing".

Although native to the Mediterranean region with other cabbages, Brussel Sprouts first appeared in Europe during the 5th century. Later on they were cultivated in the 13th century near Brussels in Belgium from where they take their name. Brussel sprouts are an excellent source of Vitamin C & D and of dietary fibre. They also contain glucosinolates - compounds which may help prevent cancer.

The main cause of failure when growing Brussel sprouts is planting them in loose, infertile soil. The ground **MUST BE FIRM** and adequately supplied with humus. Brussel Sprouts are a stalwart among vegetables and a traditional festive favourite. Their taste is improved after the plants have been frosted. They are slow-growing plants and the approximate time between sowing and picking is: 28 weeks for early varieties and 36 weeks for the later varieties.

Cultivation

Prepare your soil in the **autumn** digging in plenty of well rotted manure - up to 2 bucketfuls of well-rotted manure per square metre/yard or garden compost. The ground must not be acid the ground should have a ph value of between 6 and 7, use lime in winter to sweeten the soil if necessary.

In the **spring** apply Growmore fertiliser or a high potassium general fertiliser such as Vitax Q4 - 3 handfuls per square metre/yard.

You will need a sunny site, sheltered from strong winds. Seeds are traditionally sown in a separate seed bed rather than in the main vegetable plot and are then transplanted in early summer when more space is available. Start seeds off from early March/early April to get the best crop. Use early, mid-season and late cultivars to provide a longer growing season.

Sow seeds thinly in the seed bed in rows 15cm (6inches) apart and 13mm (1/2inch) deep under cloches or fleece. Thin seedlings to 7.45cm (3inches) apart when they are large enough to handle. **Grow in pots if clubroot is a problem.

In **mid-May/earlyJune** when seedlings are 10-15cm (4-6inches) tall with 7 true leaves - transplant into their final growing position. Plant **FIRMLY** with the lowest leaves just above the surface of the soil. **SPACE** - 60cm (2feet) apart with 75cm (2.5feet) between rows. **DO NOT FORK** over soil before planting seedlings - tread soil down gently, rake lightly and remove all surface rubbish. Water regularly until plants are settled in, then in

dry weather every 10-14 days. In **July** apply a top-soil dressing of nitrogen rich fertiliser ie dried poultry manure pellets - 150g (5 oz) per square metre/yard.

September - as sprouts begin to form in early autumn earth up soil around base of stems to provide extra support. Mulch around base of plants with rotted garden compost to help prevent rocking and provide food. Sprouts are tall plants and when the wind rocks the plants it breaks the small root hairs that take the water and food to the plants, thus producing a smaller yield. Therefore, before the high winds of winter arrive it is best to firmly stake your plants. In really windy areas grow your plants under netting. This won't stop the wind but it will reduce its speed and power. FIRM soil helps prevent wind-rock. If your soil is light, heel and toe the soil to firm it.

Harvesting.

You can start harvesting your sprouts from August with the early cultivars. Later cultivars - the flavour is improved after sprouts have been frosted. Start picking the lowest sprouts first when they are the size of a walnut, firm and tightly closed. Snap off with a sharp downward tug. At the end of the season the tops can also be eaten. Do not remove the tops of the Brussels before all the sprouts are used. Removing beforehand will stop the development of the sprouts.

Pests and Remedies

Clubroot: Roots swollen and distorted, leaves pale and wilt easily. Plants may die.

Remedy: Improve drainage, add lime to your soil to make more alkaline. Do not grow in infected soil. If clubroot is a real problem on your allotment then refer to an article on how to control/prevent clubroot on www.allotment-garden.org/brusselsprout-growing.

Cabbage root fly: White larvae feed on the roots of the plant just below the surface of the soil. Plants wilt and die.

Remedy: Grow under insect proof mesh or horticultural fleece. Use brassica collars to keep fly away until plants established.

Caterpillars: A number of caterpillars will feed on brassicas but the most common is the caterpillar of the cabbage white butterfly. They will eat the leaves, bore into the hearts of your cabbages and Brussels.

Remedy: Pick off caterpillars by hand and prevent egg laying with the use of insect proof mesh or fine netting 5.7mm

Wind-rock and lack of nutrients: These are the most common cause of "blown" sprouts. Buttons become loose rather than tight and firm.

Remedy: Ensure plants are firmly staked to prevent rocking in the wind. Remove blown sprouts and give additional feeding with a high nitrogen fertiliser. A sudden warm spell can cause loose heads. Add mulch around base of plants - keeps the roots cooler and helps retain moisture.

Birds: Especially pigeons cause a number of problems - eat the seedlings and destroy the leaves and buds of plants.

Remedy: Protect with netting or fleeces. Scarecrows might help in the short term.

Slugs and snails: leave slime trails on soil and plants.

Remedy: Beer traps, egg shells crushed around plants, pellets...whatever you normally find effective.

Brassica White fly: (really a small moth). This is a pest but not a serious problem.

Remedy: Wash away with a jet of water or insecticidal soap which contains fatty acids that block the breathing holes of the moth.

****Brussel Sprouts** like being planted near Nasturtiums.

Growing Brussels for our Annual Show.

Fresh, solid, tightly closed sprouts of good colour. Size according to cultivar. All stalks should be the same length, choose tightly closed sprouts of a uniform size. Do not remove too many outer leaves.

Refs: www.rhs-org.uk/vegetables/brusselsprouts/grow-your-own

www.allotment-garden.org/vegetables/brusselsprout-growing

As with cabbages, Brussels seem to be a vegetable that people love or loathe. Too many memories of soggy sprouts. I am therefore including a recipe which I have taken from the Allotment Society website on How to Grow Brussels.

Clean, remove outer leaves.

Drop into boiling water and allow them to cook for 2-3 minutes.

Remove and drain well, then fry gently in butter with plenty of black pepper for a few minutes.

******The practice of cutting a cross shape at the bottom of each Brussel before boiling is said to have a two-fold use. Firstly it is said to reduce cooking time and secondly it is said to "....keep the Devil out." However there is no evidence for either claim and indeed it is said that the cross, instead of helping the Brussels cook evenly can make the sprouts waterlogged. Either cut the Brussels in half when cooking or pop into the pan as they are.