

How to Grow

Cauliflowers

Mark Twain wrote that "..the cauliflower is nothing but a cabbage with a college education". He was of course referring to its more refined flavour, whereas to the gardener there is an equally important difference - cauliflowers are more difficult to grow.

The cauliflower (*Brassica Oleracea*) is a highly modified form of cabbage. Its origin is in the northeast mediterranean particularly with the island of Cyprus. The name cauliflower comes from the Latin words *caulis* (cabbage) and *flos* (flower).

According to the Allotment Society article on "How to Grow Cauliflowers" www.allotment-garden.org/vegetables/cauliflower-growingthey are not the easiest vegetable to grow, but can be very satisfying. A beautifully formed cauliflower with tight curds looks wonderful. The other advantage to growing your own, in shops cauliflowers are almost always creamy white, but by growing your own you can enjoy yellow, green or purple ones. They are high in Vitamins C and K.

Cultivation

Cauliflowers take up a lot of space and need rich, deep soil and lots of watering BUT can be grown all year round. During the growing season there must be no check to growth and failure to provide this can often result in the production of tiny "button" deformed heads and a lot of wasted effort.

Cauliflowers will require a sunny spot, and if growing winter varieties avoid planting in a frost pocket. Dig your ground in the autumn incorporating plenty of well-rotted manure or compost. Lime if necessary in winter. ** To ascertain whether your soil needs lime added, check with: www.rhs.org.uk/soil-composts-mulches/lime-liming.

Sowing your seeds indoors.

Cauliflowers mature in a rush therefore don't raise too many plants at a time. Plant successionally. The main sowing season is between March - May, although early crops can be achieved by sowing under glass in Jan/Feb.

Start your **summer varieties** indoors as seed in early spring - March-May.

Start your **autumn varieties** indoors as seed in mid-late spring.

Winter varieties are more difficult as they take so long to mature, remaining in the ground for almost a year before maturing. . Sow in late spring.

Germination time of seeds 7 - 12 days

From sowing to harvesting - 18-24 weeks summer and autumn varieties

40-50 weeks winter varieties

The best results come from sowing in modular seed trays in a good multi-purpose potting compost. Thin modules at the seedling stage to one plant per module. Move to a larger pot when necessary but don't allow to get pot bound as it is essential to avoid root disturbance. ** To check if pot bound - tip the pot upside down holding the plant between your fingers. This is to stop the soil falling out. If white roots go around the pot in a circle - it's pot bound. Move to a larger pot, gently teasing out the roots to encourage them to grow in their new compost.

Transplant your seedlings when they are 10-12cm (4-5inches) tall, spacing them 60cm (2foot) each way. Winter plants require spacing of 75cm (2.5foot) apart. **Before planting** add and rake in a high potassium fertiliser such as Vitax Q4 - 3 handfuls per square metre/yard. **Firm soil** before planting. To avoid any check to growth whilst planting out seedlings, WATER plants well the day before planting out. DIG a hole deep enough to hold the plant in, with the lower leaves at ground level. FILL this hole repeatedly with water THEN fill the hole with soil and ensure the plant is sitting in a large area of moist soil. FIRM soil very well against roots. Use protective discs if cabbage rootfly is a problem. Hoe regularly and provide protection against birds.

These are a hungry crop therefore feed occasionally. Water well in dry weather and at least every 10 days, thoroughly watering the root area.

Protect your WINTER crop from frost and snow by breaking a few leaves over the curd. In SUMMER the broad leaves extend beyond the curd and are often tied together before the harvest to shade the curd and prevent discolouration .

Sowing your seeds outdoors.

Sow summer cultivars in a prepared seedbed in early spring and autumn varieties in late spring. Sow seed 1.5cm (1/2inch) deep in rows 15cm (6inches) apart. Thin to 10cm (4inches) apart. Transplant your seedlings to their final beds when 10-12cm (4-5inches) tall as above.

Cauliflowers like to be planted near celery, beans, tansy and nasturtiums.

They dislike being planted near strawberries.

Harvesting your crop.

Different varieties mature at different sizes, so do check your seed packet and harvest at the recommended size. The head should be firm and compact. Once it starts to separate its past its best and will taste bitter. White varieties should be harvested before they turn yellow.

Cut the stem with a knife taking the head and a few of the leaves beneath it. Cut in the morning when the heads still have the dew on them *but* in frosty weather wait until midday. If you wish to keep the heads for up to 3 weeks, lift the plant, shaking the soil from the roots and hang upside down in a cool shed. Mist the curds occasionally.

Cauliflowers can be stored in the fridge for 1-2 weeks wrapped tightly in cling film. A glut can be frozen but they tend to grow a little soft and discoloured.

Pests and Remedies.

Clubroot: Roots become swollen and distorted. Leaves become pale and yellow and wilt easily. Plants may die.

Remedy: Improve drainage. Add lime to make soil more alkaline. Do not grow in an affected area.

****For those who have a clubroot infected plot there is a very helpful article to be found on:**
www.allotment-garden.org/vegetable/brassica-information/growing-brassicas-clubroot-infected-plot

Birds: Birds, especially pigeons can cause many problems, eating seedlings, buds, fruit and vegetables.

Remedy: Cover with netting or fleece. Scarecrows and scaring mechanisms can work for a while but the most reliable method is to cover plants with horticultural netting or fleece.

Caterpillars: All caterpillars will attack brassicas but the cabbage white caterpillar causes the greatest damage. They eat the leaves and bore into the heart of the brassicas.

Remedy: For a mild attack pinch off caterpillars by hand. Insect proof mesh 5.7mm or fine netting can prevent egg laying.

Slugs and snails: Leave a trail on slime on plants and soil. Feed on young seedlings.

Remedy: Beer traps, egg shell barriers, copper tape, biological controls.

Cabbage Root Fly: Maggots eat the roots of cabbages and other brassicas. Plants grow slowly, wilt and die as the roots are eaten.

Remedy: Protective brassica collar - this will prevent the female fly laying her eggs on the soil close to the host plant. Eggs laid on the collar often dry up and fail to hatch.

Grow under insect proof mesh or horticultural fleece. This latter may be preferred for seedbeds as helps warm the soil and can help reduce other brassica problems such as caterpillars.

Crop rotation otherwise cabbage root flies emerge from overwintered pupae in the soil.

Growing for our Annual Show.

Heads with symmetrical, close, solid, white curds, free from stain or frothiness. Stage with about 3 inches of stalk - trim back the leaves so that they match the outside of the curd. Cover exhibit with clean paper or cloth to exclude light, but remove before judging begins.

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

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