



Harvest of the Month

Broccoli



Social Sciences

Like all the other Brassicas, broccoli was developed from wild cabbage. It is a result from breeding landrace Brassica crops in the Northern Mediterranean starting around the sixth Century. With origins in primitive cultivars grown in the Roman Empire, it was most likely improved in the Southern Italian Peninsula or in Sicily. Broccoli spread to Northern Europe by the 18th Century, and was then brought to North America in the 19th century by Italian immigrants. Today, China and India grow more broccoli than all other countries combined; the United States is a distant third. 95% of the broccoli grown in the United States is grown in California.

Brócoli means broccoli in Spanish.



Botany

The scientific name of broccoli is *Brassica oleracea*. It is a member of the Brassica family of plants, which contains many food crops including cauliflower, cabbage, turnips, and kale. The Brassica family is unique in that we eat all the different parts of the plant; roots, stems, leaves, and flowers! What part of the plant do you think is a head of broccoli? The flower buds!





Nutrition

Broccoli is fiber rich and an excellent source of vitamins and minerals including Vitamin A, C, and K. Broccoli also contains significant amounts of calcium, iron, potassium and folate. It is considered one of the very best anti-cancer vegetables, as it contains a whole range of beneficial phytochemicals, glucosinolates, luteine, and isothiocyanin. These sulfur-containing compounds are responsible for broccoli's distinctive taste and are best preserved by roasting or stir-frying, rather than boiling.

Harvesting

The perfect time to harvest broccoli is when the individual flower buds are visible and somewhat swollen. The head should have a nice domed appearance. You can also cut the head before this time, and it is still edible after this stage, once the flower buds begin to open. Many varieties will produce side shoots once the main head is cut. Check your plants every few days and continue to harvest these side shoots, which will look like individual florets.

Growing Tips

Growing large heads of broccoli is all about getting the timing right. Broccoli needs to grow fast for best quality. To do this it needs a rich, moist, well-drained soil with lots of organic matter and nutrients. Broccoli is not a plant that enjoys hot weather. Spring plantings need to be done as soon as the soil is dry enough to work as our Springs are often not long enough to grow big heads of broccoli. In Sonoma County we can plant broccoli starting in mid-August through October for late Autumn and Winter harvests.

Care & Maintenance

Broccoli is not a low-maintenance crop. The plants need looking after carefully. Make sure they are planted in fertile soil and that the soil remains moist throughout the lifecycle, or they can bolt prematurely. Broccoli plants can get quite large so be sure to give them plenty of space. The more space they have, the bigger the plants will get (if the soil has sufficient fertility, and the bigger the heads will be. Plan on at least 16" between plants.

Fun Fact

Rapini, sometimes called "broccoli rabe", is a distinct species from broccoli, forming similar but smaller heads, and is actually a type of turnip (*Brassica rapa*).