

Growing Your Own

A beginner's guide to gardening

Kale

In recent years, kale has been called a “super food” because of the ways it can benefit our health. Kale is a cool-season crop and may be among the first vegetables you harvest from your garden in the spring.

Varieties

- **White Russian**—flat leaves with notched edges that are blueish green with white stems and leaf ribs.
- **Red Russian**—like White Russian, it has flat leaves with notched edges that are blueish green, but with red to maroon stems and leaf ribs.
- **Lacinato**—also called dinosaur kale, has long and more narrow leaves than the Russian variety with dark green puckered leaves.

- **Blue Knight**—bluish green to yellow green leaves that are ruffled on the edges and curl inward; very productive, mild flavor.



Red Russian
(Rick Durham)



Lacinato
(Rick Durham)



Redbor
(Rachel Rudolph)



Blue Knight
(Rick Durham)



Prizm
(All-American Selections)

- **Vates**—similar in appearance to Blue Knight, in that leaves are ruffled on the edges and curl inward, but less blue; very productive, and flavorful.
- **Dwarf Siberian**—like Blue Knight but leaves are more compact and tightly bound with more curls on the edges; productive, mild flavor
- **Redbor**—similar in shape to Blue Knight with leaves that are ruffled on the edges and curl inward, but with purple leaves; makes a great addition to salads.
- **Prizm**—a recent All-American selection winner with deep green leaves that are ruffled on the edges and compact; attractive for use in containers.

How much to plant

A 5- to 10-foot row of kale should provide enough leaves for fresh use for one person. Plant more if you wish to freeze kale leaves for storage, or if you are feeding more than one person.

How much and when to plant

Kale is a cool-season crop and can withstand frosts and freezing temperatures. Plant seeds or transplants mid- to late March in Kentucky. Kale leaves will become bitter during the hot summer months. A fall garden planting can be made in late July to mid-August. The fall planting often remains productive until very cold temperatures in winter causes growth to stop.

Plant about 4 to 6 seeds for each foot of row and cover the seed about ¼ to ½ inch deep. After they begin to grow, thin seedlings to 8 to 12 inches apart. The removed plants can be added to salads or soups. You may also find ready-to-transplant seedlings at your local garden center. These can be planted about 12 inches apart in the garden. For more information on transplanting, see *Preparing Your Garden* (NEP-219) at <http://www2.ca.uky.edu/agcomm/pubs/NEP/NEP219/NEP219.pdf>.

Pests and disease

Wet soils may promote “damping off,” a disease that affects young seedlings. The stem will have a soft, wet spot where it meets the soil. Young seedlings do not recover from damping off. To prevent this disease, make sure seedlings have well drained soil and are not overcrowded. Once growing, though, kale is not likely to get a disease.

Pests that affect kale include aphids, caterpillars, and flea beetles. If you notice problems with insect damage, call your local [county Extension office](#) for advice on treatment and control, or consult the UK Cooperative Extension publication, *Growing Vegetables at Home in Kentucky* (ID-128) at www2.ca.uky.edu/agcomm/pubs/id/id128/id128.pdf.



Damping off is a disease in which the seedling gets soft and rotten where the stem meets the soil.

(Paul Bertrand, University of Georgia, Bugwood.org)

Harvesting

As lower leaves expand, they may be removed from the plant. It is best to pick kale in the morning while it is cool. Cutting the leaves is better than breaking them off since there is less damage to the plant. Harvest leaves by cutting them away from the stem with a pair of scissors. It is common to remove 2 to 3 leaves per plant every 7 to 10 days. The younger leaves at the top of the plant will be more tender than the older leaves lower on the plant. After the taste of the leaves becomes bitter due to hot weather, it is best to remove plants from the garden.



Harvest kale by cutting the leaves from the plant with scissors.

(Rick Durham)

Serving

Kale contains many vitamins, such as A, C, and K. It promotes heart health and can help prevent cancer.

To eat raw: Wash leaves in lukewarm water. Remove roots, rough ribs, and center stalks if they are large or fibrous. Serve in a salad.

To cook: Add washed greens to a medium-sized saucepan with $\frac{1}{4}$ inch of water. Bring water to a boil. Cover and cook until tender. Crisp and tender leaves may require 5 to 10 minutes. Kale may also be sautéed in a skillet with other vegetables or cooked in a soup.

Storing

Kale leaves should be refrigerated in a plastic bag or in the crisper drawer. Leaves will stay fresh for 7 to 10 days.

To freeze: Wash young, tender green leaves thoroughly and cut off woody stems. Blanch greens for 2 to 3 minutes, cool, drain, and package. Leave $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch headspace, seal, label, and freeze. Frozen greens can be stored up to 1 year.

Summary

Varieties

There are many varieties of kale. Varieties that grow well in Kentucky are: White Russian, Red Russian, Lacinato, Blue Knight, Vates, Dwarf Siberian, Redbor, and Prizm.

How much to plant

A 5- to 10-foot row of kale should provide enough leaves for fresh use for one person.

How and when to plant

Kale is a cool-season crop and can withstand frosts and freezing temperatures. When growing kale make sure to leave space between the plants.

Pest and diseases

Pests that affect kale include aphids, caterpillars, and flea beetles. A disease that affects young kale will make the stem soft where it touches the soil.

Harvesting

It is common to remove 2 to 3 leaves per plant every 7 to 10 days. Cutting the leaves is better than breaking them.

Serving

Kale can be eaten raw in a salad or sautéed, steamed, or cooked in a soup.

Storing

Kale leaves should be refrigerated in a plastic bag or in the crisper drawer. They can also be frozen.

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