

Broccolini: A Gourmet Vegetable Anyone Can Grow

by Margene Whitler Hucek



A hybrid of two broccoli varieties, Broccolini produces small florets on elongated, edible stems.

PLANTING BASICS

Getting Started Sow seeds indoors about six weeks before the desired transplant date and plant seedlings after all danger of a hard frost has passed. For a fall harvest, sow seeds in the garden in mid- to late summer.

Spacing Plant 12 to 24 inches apart, in rows 18 to 36 inches apart.

Days to Maturity Depending on the variety, 50 to 60 days from date of transplant.

Sources

Johnny's Selected Seeds, Winslow, ME. www.johnnyseeds.com.

Park Seed Company, Hodges, S.C. www.parkseed.com.

Territorial Seed Company, Cottage Grove, OR. www.territorialseed.com.

West Coast Seeds, Vancouver, BC, Canada. www.westcoastseeds.com.

IF YOU ARE fan of fresh broccoli and regret its short harvest season, consider planting Broccolini®. A trademarked cross between broccoli (*Brassica oleracea* var. *italica*) and Chinese broccoli, also known as gai-lan, kailan, or Chinese kale (*B. oleracea* var. *alboglabra*), this member of the cabbage family is easy to grow and has a refined appearance and delicate flavor prized by restaurant chefs everywhere. Add to that it's significantly more expensive per pound at the supermarket than broccoli, and you can't lose by including it in your vegetable garden.

Rather than producing one large head like broccoli, Broccolini yields

several slender six- to seven-inch-long sweet and tender stalks topped with bite-size heads. Under favorable conditions, harvests continue into late spring and early summer, and it can be planted again in late summer for fall harvest. The only downside to Broccolini is confusion over its multiple names (see sidebar, opposite page), but once you get your hands on it, it's clear sailing.

GROWING GUIDELINES

To grow your own transplants, start seeds indoors about six weeks before the last-frost date in your region. Where summers are cool, seeds may be direct-sown

a quarter to half inch deep once the soil temperature reaches 55 degrees Fahrenheit (F). Broccolini grows best in temperatures between 65 and 80 degrees F; be sure your plants will have sufficient time to mature before the onset of higher temperatures. For a fall harvest, sow seed from mid- to late summer.

Transplant seedlings after all danger of a hard freeze in spring to a sunny location with free-draining, fertile soil with a pH of 6.0 to 7.0. Space plants 12 to 24 inches apart. Plants are more sensitive to cold than broccoli, so cover new plants if even a light frost is predicted. Mulch to conserve moisture and control weeds. Provide consistent soil moisture, especially during periods of drought.

Broccolini is a heavy feeder, so apply a low-nitrogen fertilizer every three weeks during the growing season. Remove the central portion when it appears in order to promote development of side shoots.

PESTS AND DISEASES

Broccolini is susceptible to the same pests and diseases as broccoli. The white cabbage moth lays its eggs on the undersides of leaves, and the larvae that hatch—cabbageworms—chew through leaves and into heads, where they are difficult to extricate.

The most effective way to prevent cabbageworm damage is to use fabric row covers, placed immediately after planting. This will also deter cabbage loopers. The adult form of this pest is a gray moth, which also lays its eggs on the underside of leaves.

If plants aren't covered, check the undersides of leaves frequently and remove the sticky eggs before they hatch; handpick cabbageworms or loopers. Alternatively, apply Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis*), a biological control that can also be effective against these pests. Although seldom a problem, aphids can be controlled with a hard spray of water or application of Neem oil.

To avoid diseases, do not plant Broccolini in the same space you grew it—or any other cabbage family crop—in successive years.

RECOMMENDED VARIETIES

Broccolini, Asparation®, and 'Aspabroc'

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Concerning Broccolini, "there is much confusion about all the names," says Gerald Brust, vegetable specialist with the University of Maryland Cooperative Extension Service. The original hybrid developed by the Japanese seed company Sakata in



1993 was named 'Aspabroc', a nod to its stalks' resemblance to asparagus. In 1994, Sakata partnered with Sanbon Inc. of Morgan Hill, California, and began marketing the crop under the name Asparation®. When, in 1998, Sakata approached the Mann Packing Company of Salinas Valley, California, to expand production, Mann christened it 'Broccolini'—which means baby broccoli in Italian—and registered the name for

its own use. Because Mann is a major distributor of the crop to restaurants and grocery stores, that's the name people use to refer to the vegetable.

Other names for the crop include baby broccoli, brokali, and tenderstem. More crosses have been made using broccoli and Chinese broccoli as parents, resulting in new varieties. "Brokali comes from the same cross and has the varieties 'Apollo' and 'Atlantis'," says Brust.

Whatever you call this delicious vegetable, it's one worth growing. —M.W.H.

are different names for the original cross made by Sakata Seed in 1993, which has a mild flavor with peppery undertones.

Cultivars derived from other crosses between broccoli and Chinese broccoli include 'Apollo', a heavy producer that typically grows 24 to 28 inches tall and wide, and 'Atlantis', a heavy producer that requires no pinching.

ENJOYING THE HARVEST

Harvest the central crown as soon as it develops. In a week or so, six- to seven-inch-long side shoots will form from the stem. Pick when heads are tight and firm. For best flavor, harvest before white flower buds appear, although the flowers are also edible.

Broccolini is delicious roasted, grilled, or sautéed in garlic or with other spring vegetables, or added to salads. After blanching it in boiling water for one minute, it makes a great topping for pizza or an addition to pasta dishes. The edible leaves have a slight peppery taste and are great for stir-fries. I like to eat Broccolini raw, dipped into sour cream laced with dill.

A cup of Broccolini provides more available calcium than a cup of milk. It is a rich source of potassium, the B-complex vitamins, and fiber.

Although tastiest when eaten the day of harvest, it may be refrigerated up to 10 days. Extra stems can be frozen for longer storage. Just blanch, cool, drain, and pack them into freezer-safe containers for later use.



Cooked briefly in boiling water, stems make a great topping for a bowl of Asian noodles.

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