

Asian Greens: Adaptable, Beautiful, and Nutritious

by Barbara Pleasant

FANS OF Asian cuisine are familiar with greens such as bok choy, Chinese or napa cabbage, and mizuna, among others. All are varieties of *Brassica rapa*. The parent species of modern Asian greens probably originated in east-central Asia and traveled east and west with migrating farmers starting around the 8th century BC. Thousands

of years of selection in varying climates and cultures has resulted in diverse crops with names that sometimes identify their region of origin, for example, *B. rapa* var. *chinensis* for bok choy and *B. rapa* var. *japonica* for mizuna.

If you're looking to expand your palate, try growing some Asian greens this year. In addition to their nutritional

content, many of them offer ornamental value in the garden.

RECOMMENDED VARIETIES

The term "Asian greens" can be applied to a variety of vegetables, including those in genera other than *Brassica*, but the ones mentioned here have broad appeal and are readily available. All are cool-weather crops.

Bok choy, also spelled pak choy, (*Brassica rapa* var. *chinensis*) grows into a rosette of dark green leaves with thick white or light green succulent stems that become soft and juicy when cooked. 'Purple Lady' has purple leaves. Bok choy has few pest problems because of its fast growth. Baby varieties can be harvested in only six weeks; 55 days for standard varieties.

Chinese or napa cabbage (*B. rapa* var. *pekinensis*) grows best in rich, moist soil. It forms oblong heads of tightly-packed crinkled green leaves with white ribs. The main ingredient in Korean kimchi, Chinese cabbage is ideal for fermenting. 'Red Dragon' and 'Merlot' bear purple leaves. Harvest while heads are still firm, 50 to 70 days depending on variety.

Komatsuna (*B. rapa* var. *perviridis*), also called Japanese mustard spinach, features fast-growing, green or red leaves with crisp stems. Its flavor is similar to that of spinach and mustard green. Tender, heat-tolerant 'Senposai' is a cross between komatsuna and Chinese cabbage. Harvest in 30 to 50 days.

Mizuna (*B. rapa* var. *japonica*) always shows impressive vigor, though cool nights are needed to sweeten the mustardy flavor of its narrow, deeply toothed, featherlike leaves. Mizuna is considered a supergreen because of its nutritional bounty of vitamins C, K and antioxidants. Harvest in 40 to 50 days.

Tatsoi (*B. rapa* var. *narinosa*) produces lovely rosettes of spoon-shaped leaves on



Tatsoi has a mild mustard flavor and is low in calories and high in calcium and vitamins C and A.

long stems. You can gather leaves when young and tiny for salads, or let the plants mature and use them as cooking greens. This plant is also called vitamin green because it's packed with vitamin C, vitamin A, potassium, calcium, folate, and other nutrients. Harvest in 21 to 60 days.

GROWING GUIDELINES

Sow seeds or set out transplants for the first crop of these fast-growing, cool-season greens in late winter or early spring, using cloches or low tunnel hoops covered with row-cover fabric if needed to protect them from extreme cold. Sow seeds every two weeks for a continuous harvest until the onset of warm weather. After midsummer, resume staggered sowings for fall harvest up until six weeks before the first-frost date in your region.



Bok choy's white stems and contrasting dark green leaves provide ornamental value in the garden.

Asian greens need fertile, well-drained soil in full sun with a near neutral pH. Before planting, amend the soil with two inches of well-rotted compost or a balanced organic or time-release fertilizer. Sow seeds a quarter-inch deep and one inch apart, and keep moist until the seeds sprout. You also can start seeds indoors under lights about six weeks before the last frost date in your region, and set out the seedlings when they show their first true leaf. This is the best way to handle red-leafed varieties grown as edible ornamentals.

Bok choy and Chinese cabbage grow rapidly as they approach maturity, so make

sure there is ample room between plants. In addition to growing Asian greens in rows, try interplanting them with onions, leeks, or scallions. Dwarf varieties of bok choy or Chinese cabbage grow well in wide containers. Asian greens that are grown in spring often bolt, or go to seed, as days become longer and warmer.

PESTS AND DISEASES

Use wire fencing to exclude rabbits from young plantings, and be alert for slugs in rainy years. Flea beetles chew holes in the leaves of all Asian greens, so it is best to exclude them with floating row covers installed when the plants are young. Use yellow sticky traps to reduce the number of flea beetles that emerge from the soil under the cover.

Cabbageworms sometimes damage greens. They are best excluded with

lightweight row covers. Cabbageworms, armyworms, and other leaf-eating caterpillars can be controlled with organic pesticides that use Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis*) or spinosad as their active ingredients.

Avoid overhead watering when heads are forming to reduce risk of leaf spot diseases. The use of high-nitrogen fertilizers can trigger the physiological disorder called pepper spot, evidenced by small black specks on the white ribs of Chinese cabbage and bok choy, but affected stems are still edible.

ENJOYING THE HARVEST

Seedlings that are thinned to provide ma-

Sources

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

Kitazawa Seed Company, Oakland, CA. www.kitazawaseed.com.

W. Atlee Burpee Company, Warminster, PA. www.burpee.com.

PLANTING BASICS

Getting Started Choose a location in full sun with well-drained soil.

Planting Sow seeds indoors or in protected outdoor beds starting six weeks before your last frost date in spring. Make larger plantings starting in midsummer and continuing into early fall.

Spacing Sow seeds a half-inch apart and gradually thin them to 12 inches apart. Dwarf varieties can be grown at tighter spacing.

Days to Maturity Tender young greens are ready to pick in only 40 days. Heavy heads of bok choy or Chinese cabbage take a bit longer, maturing about 60 days after planting.

ture spacing can be used as baby greens in salads or stir-fry dishes. Harvest komatsuna and mizuna by slicing off entire heads near the soil line to trigger new growth.

Expect spring crops to come and go quickly as rapidly lengthening days encourage bolting (formation of flower stalks). Harvest plants promptly before they elongate, and store trimmed heads in plastic bags in the refrigerator for up to a week. Allow a few plants to bolt for a harvest of edible green flower buds, flowers, or spicy green seedpods.

Asian greens grown from summer to fall last longer in the garden, with far less bolting. Light cooking tames the flavor of leafier selections, making them good stand-ins for spinach, chard, or kale in cooked dishes from soups to risottos. Harvest all greens just before the first hard freeze. Blanch and freeze chopped greens in small packages to use during the winter months. Bok choy and Chinese cabbage will keep in the refrigerator for several weeks. 

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