

Brassica oleracea (Ornamental Kale and Cabbage)

Botanical Bytes by Bruner
by Gregory Bruner

Foliage Height: 12-24”
Foliage Width: 12-24”
Flower Height: 18-36”
Foliage Color: Green, White, Pink, Purple
Flower Color: Yellow
USDA Hardiness: Cool Season Annual
Moisture: Low-Average
Light: Full Sun – Part Sun



Brassica oleracea is commonly known as ornamental cabbage and kale. The species is divided into 2 groups. The Acephala group which is Ornamental Kale; and the Capitata group which is Ornamental Cabbage. This large family includes ordinary cabbage and kales, broccoli, brussels sprouts, cauliflower, collards, kohlrabi, rutabagas, and turnips.

Kales and Cabbages are native to the Eurasia which comprises the regions of Europe and Asia. There is evidence that cultivation goes back as far as 100 AD when Greeks, Romans, and early Christians used it for cooking. Evidence has also been discovered in the region of Asia dating unearthed pots of cabbage back to 4000 BC. These versatile and hardy plants were useful to us long before they became ornamental.

Ornamental Brassica oleracea's are also edible, though not quite as tasty as their non-ornamental cousins still have nutritional value. Kale in particular is high in beta carotene, vitamin K, vitamin C, lutein, zeaxanthin, and calcium. While cabbage is an excellent source of Vitamin A, Vitamin C, Vitamin K, Vitamin B6, Folate, Magnesium, Potassium and Manganese.

These cool weather loving plants appreciate a full sun location preferring a well drained soil. Foliage color can actually be intensified if low nitrogen fertilizers are used during its growing season. Foliage colors also intensify as temperatures consistently get below 60 degrees. Once planted the only major insect concern would be cabbage looper caterpillars and once the temperatures cool off in the fall these should not be a problem.

Members of the Brassica oleracea family are technically Biennials. The second season the plants will begin their reproductive cycle and flower. Since gardeners are more interested in the colorful leaves than the flowers these plants are generally sold as annuals and replanted each season.

The history and legends are as varied as the regions this plant grows. Early Greeks and Romans avoided planting Brassica oleracea near their grapevines because the wine produced from the grapes would take on the taste of the Brassica family member. Greek legend says Dionysus, the god of grapes and wine, once cursed a man with madness for his disobedience. The man while in this temporary delusional state accidentally killed his son. Later in his sorrow, where his tears touched the ground sprang cabbage plants.

Later in history during the 18th century ships on long voyages loaded cabbage as a food source. It is said that one captain actually used cabbage leaves to make a poultice to bind injured sailors wounds after a storm. The poultices apparently help reduce gangrene in the wounds saving the sailors lives.

The family Brassica oleracea has a long and unique history. Gardeners and cooks have been enjoying it for thousands of years. This sturdy, easy to grow plant will easily become a favorite of novice and expert gardeners alike and definitely deserves a place in the winter garden.