

Ask A Master Gardener

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Growing Brussels Sprouts

We both enjoy Brussels sprouts and would like to grow some, but we haven't seen any plants in the stores or heard of anyone growing them in our area. Can we grow them here?

Even though you seldom talk to anyone who grows Brussels sprouts in this area they will grow here. Maybe the scarcity of them in area gardens has more to do with likes and dislikes than their ability to grow in our area. It seems as though the people I know either really like them, or really dislike them. While I enjoy them, I was surprised the other day to hear my grandson ask his Mother if she would buy some of those "little cabbages" for him.

Brussels sprouts (*Brassica oleracea* var. *gemmifera*) are named for Brussels, Belgium where they have been grown since the 1300s. They are a member of a group plants known as cole crops which includes other popular cool weather vegetables, such as, cabbage, cauliflower, collards, kale, mustard and broccoli. According to the Texas AgriLife Extension Service even though "cole" sounds the same as "cold" the terms have very different meanings. "Cole" refers to the members of the mustard (*Cruciferae*) family, not the temperature. All of these common garden plants are descendents of a wild cabbage originally found in the Mediterranean and Asia Minor.

Since I have never grown Brussels sprouts myself, I checked with the Walter Reeves website and the University of Georgia Cooperative Extension to find out how. Here is what I learned.

Brussels sprouts are tall (often 2-3 feet) plants grown to harvest in the fall or winter, because cool weather is needed for the best flavor and quality. They need to be planted in full sun (8-10 hours a day) in well-drained soil. If they are planted in too much shade the plants will be weak and they will produce fewer and smaller sprouts.

They are slow to mature. Seeds should be planted in mid to late-summer and take 80-100 days to mature. In the spring transplants should be planted just before the average date of the last frost. Plants planted in August will actually produce a better crop as long as they are kept watered during the hot late summer weather. They are very cold hardy plants and will survive freezing. Choose plants that are young and actively growing, not tall or woody.

Brussels sprouts are heavy feeders. When transplanting work about 2.5 pounds of 10-10-10 into 100 square feet of garden. Two to four weeks after planting when the plants are about 12 inches tall side-dress with a complete fertilizer.

Place transplants about 18 inches apart in rows that are 36 inches apart. Be sure to place the plants at the same level in which they are growing. Because the maturity time is so long, Brussels sprouts need good care and maintenance. They need about one inch of water per week, especially during our often dry summers.

The sprouts, little green cabbages, develop from the bottom of the plant up. When the plants are two to three feet tall, pinch off the growing tip to allow more energy for sprout development instead of it going to leaf production. Dusting or spraying with a biological worm spray or dust may be needed to prevent a cabbage worm infestation. These are available at most nurseries, garden centers and feed stores.

They should be harvested when they are hard, compact, deep green and 1 ½ to 2 inches in diameter and after frosty weather for the best flavor. If planted in late summer the sprouts can be left on the plant during mild winters and harvested all winter as needed. When planting in the spring to avoid bitter sprouts harvest them before hot weather. Because the sprouts develop and mature from the bottom to the top of the plant, they should be harvested the same way.

Some feed stores, garden centers and nurseries in our area do carry Brussels sprouts, but they can be hard to find. If you do not see them where you shop, ask them if they will order some for you.

For answers to any of your gardening questions, contact a Carroll County Master Gardener Extension Volunteer at 770-836-8546, via e-mail at ccmg@uga.edu or visit our office in the Ag Center at 900 Newnan Road in Carrollton.