

Growing African Kale

Brassica oleraceae var. *acephala*

The plant

Many of the African types of kale are more primitive forms of our cultivated kale and cabbage. We have found a number of types grown by Zimbabwean and Ethiopian growers on allotments. Many of these are cultivated widely in their countries of origin and form an important component of their diet.

Varieties and plant material

There are two main types that are grown in different ways. Chomolia from Zimbabwe has a shorter growing season and will flower in the UK, producing seed. The other main type covo will not produce seed in the UK, but is very easily propagated by taking cuttings from side shoots. It grows like a walking stick cabbage into a large plant.

Planting and site

African kale needs to be grown on fairly free draining soil with good soil fertility – it should be manured beforehand or grown after turning in a green manure such as vetch or clover. For chomolia, sow seeds into modules or trays in May then transplant in June/July. Plants should be spaced at 60-70cm/24-28in both between and within rows.

Covo can only be grown from cuttings. July/August is a good time to do this. Break small side shoots from a mature plant. 5-10cm/2-4in is ideal. Trim the stems back to a node, and remove any excess leaves so that there are 2 – 3 small leaves remaining. Five cuttings will fit in a 15cm/6in pot full of cutting compost or leaf mould mixed with sand. Keep in a warm place, ideally with bottom heat, and once rooted, transfer the cuttings to individual pots of potting compost.

Continue to grow on and transplant to the final position in early spring. Plants will eventually reach a large size so can be spaced 1m/3ft apart. Once established, the plant will grow as



a perennial bush so that leaves can be harvested whenever required.

Pests, weeds and diseases

African kale will succumb to all the normal pests and diseases that afflict brassicas. At an early stage the plants are tempting pigeon feed, so should be kept covered. In a dry season, leaves may become infested with cabbage aphid especially from August into the autumn once there are fewer predators around to keep them under control.

The plants should not be grown in an area where brassicas have been grown in the last four years to reduce the risk of clubroot infestation.

Harvesting and storage

Leaves of both chomolia and covo can be cut when required, and will store for a few days under cool conditions. Covo will continue to produce leaves over an extended period, as it should not flower in the UK.

The leaves are commonly cooked in a sauce with peanut butter often eaten with a cornmeal porridge known as 'sadza'.



This leaflet is produced as part of the Sowing New Seeds Project. This is funded by Big Lottery's Local Food Fund and has produced a resource of information on growing advice, experiences and seeds to promote growing of exotic produce in the UK.

For further information visit www.sowingnewseeds.org.uk
or email sowingnewseeds@gardenorganic.org.uk