

The Brassica Bed

Probably one of the trickiest groups of plants are the brassicas, they suffer from many pests and diseases which unfortunately usually attack the foliage which is the part of the plant that we want to eat. Part of the problem is that there are so many wild plants (or weeds) in the brassica family that will harbour pests and diseases that will happily transfer to your crops when they detect a whole row of tasty brassicas.

First of all it is important to get the soil right. Brassicas can tolerate a heavier soil and indeed do best if the soil is firm so do not over cultivate before planting. They require a reasonable level of fertility, in particular they need good levels of nitrogen so plant after the legumes in a rotation (legumes grow symbiotically with bacteria that actually replenish soil nitrogen levels), or add plenty of organic matter to the soil a few weeks before planting. If you don't have access to well rotted garden compost or manure then there are plenty of bio fertilisers available for the potager, look for the N:P:K ratio which should be listed on the packet, you need good nitrogen (N) levels for example N:P:K 4-3-2 (Engrais complet or engrais potager)

To avoid club root disease you also need to raise the pH – i.e. make the soil more alkaline. Traditionally you would use ground limestone (garden lime) for this or 'Carbonate de Chaux', alternatively you can use calcified seaweed which is fast acting and acts as a fertiliser and plant tonic too plant health and disease resistance – look out for 'Engrais chaux marine algues coccolithes'.

There are unfortunately lots of pests above the ground too which can decimate your brassica crops. Cabbage white butterflies lay their eggs on the plants from May onwards and the young caterpillars can completely defoliate plants in a matter of days. You can create a tunnel cloche using fine netting to prevent the adult butterfly from having access to the leaves but if the holes are too large the butterfly will find its way on and then gets trapped. Enviromesh is a lightweight fine netting that you can cover the plants with and is used as a 'floating cloche' which prevents



the butterflies and other insects such as cabbage white fly and 'flea beetle' from getting to the leaves. You can use a natural bacterium 'Bacillus Thuringiensis' which parasitizes the caterpillars, but this should be used with caution because it will affect other types of butterfly larvae too. Prevention is by far the best method environmentally.

You don't need to stick to cabbages, there are lots of other leafy vegetables that will give you a supply of fresh greens throughout the year and although it is too late now for sowing spring and summer cabbages, they are still available as young plants in the garden centres and you can still sow Kale, winter cabbage varieties such as 'January King' and 'Savoy', Purple sprouting broccoli and Brussels sprouts throughout June.

Generally, it is best to sow brassicas in a seed tray or modular trays and grow them on until they have about 4-6 leaves before planting out in their final positions. They tend to germinate quickly and should be given good light so that they don't get too leggy. (if you have sown them into a seed tray you should prick out into a modular tray as soon as the first pair of true leaves appear, one seedling per module). Late sowings (after May) will not really need the protection of a polytunnel and you can keep trays in a sheltered spot until they are ready for planting out. You can also make a seed bed in an area of your vegetable plot, sow thinly in rows and transplant the sturdiest plants into their final positions when they have developed 4-6 leaves.

It is possible to grow a wide variety of leafy vegetables and many will harvest well into the winter or early in the spring. It is worth considering the following:

- Kale and borecole can be very decorative and can be used in containers or a herbaceous border to add long lasting colour and texture – they are often planted in the municipal summer bedding schemes all over France. Choose varieties such as 'Red Russian' with curly purple leave or 'Cavolo Nero' with the dark long blades for contrast.
- Chinese cabbage can be sown successionaly from June to August, they are fast growing and will be ready for harvest within a few weeks.
- Winter crops can be more successful than the summer because all of the pests that eat the leaves are dormant so consider late summer sowings of Mizuna and Rocket for winter salad leaves and chard which can be used as a perpetual spinach in salads, soups, curries, stir fries and as a side vegetable.
- You can sow most brassicas thickly onto the surface of a shallow pot filled with compost to grow your own microgreens for a healthy salad garnish