

Brassica oleracea var. *capitata*

CABBAGE is an annual to perennial. Native to eastern Asia it has spikes of yellow flowers. It is also known as *Band gobhi* (Urdu), *Chou* (French), *Col* (Spanish), *Gova* (Singhalese), *Kabici* (Kikuyu), *Kabocci* (Maltese), *Kalam* (Persian), *Kam lam* (Chinese), *Keräkaali* (Finnish), *Kobi* (Gujarati), *Kohl* (German), *Lahana* (Arabic), *Repollo* (Spanish), *Rotkohl* (German), *Shou* (Creole), *Vitkål* (Swedish), *Weisskohl* (German), and *Ye tsoi* (Chinese); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of gain, profit, and self-will.

Warning – cabbage can be poisonous for animals if fed to them in large quantities over long periods.

Oleracea means ‘vegetable- or cooking herb-like or of the herb-, vegetable or kitchen garden’.). *Capitata* is derived from Latin *capito* (man with a large head) meaning ‘having a dense head’.

Known in Europe for more than 4,000 years the wild cabbage, through cultivation, led not only to the different varieties of cabbage available now, but also to such vegetables as broccoli (*Brassica oleracea* var. *italica*), Brussels sprouts (*Brassica oleracea* var. *gemmifera*) and cauliflower (*Brassica oleracea* var. *botrytis*), to name just three out of a total of about 400. The origins of cabbage still provoke debate among botanists today, as some believe it is native to northern Europe not eastern Asia based on how it could most logically have reached certain areas and its degree of acceptance in these by local communities. If those botanists who back the northern Europe theory prove to be correct then it could be likely, such botanists conclude, that sea-kale (*Crambe maritima*) was an ancestor.

According to Thracian legend the mythical King Lycurgus challenged his enemy Dionysus, the god of wine, by pulling up grapevines. The King was sent blind and mad. In this state he unwittingly cut down his son, Dryas, thinking he was a vine and as he wept, when he realized what he had done, his tears turned into cabbages as they touched the ground.

Authorities seem to have concluded from known records that although cabbage was familiar to both the ancient Greeks and the Romans, the latter used the plant overall with greater enthusiasm. However both believed that cabbage eaten during a banquet prevented inebriation. [Recent research at a university in Texas in the United States has led to the production of a cabbage extract that is said to be helpful in the treatment of alcoholism.] Greeks and Romans also used the cabbage’s leaves and juice medicinally to heal wounds. It is thought that the Romans introduced the first cultivated varieties of cabbage to Britain. When the Romans left, Britain and northern Europe were using forerunners of today’s cabbage more as a flavouring than a vegetable. By the Middle Ages the plants had ‘progressed’ to vegetable status. It was not until 1570 that the first Savoy cabbage arrived in Britain from the Netherlands.

The cabbage had a strong foothold in northern and central Europe. Russia and central Europe seem to have pickled it, while Scandinavian countries dried and salted the vegetable for Winter food. However, of all European countries, Ireland took to it most and, as farming blossomed, so for the Irish the cabbage assumed a significant position in the national diet. It is hardly surprising that the main ingredients in the traditional Irish Hallowe’ en dish, Colcannon are the cabbage and the potato (*Solanum tuberosum*). Preservation of cabbage in brine ie. *sauerkraut*, has been practised for hundreds of years in Europe and it was one

of the first food products to be manufactured in the 17th Century.

On the other side of the Atlantic several North American Indian tribes had absorbed cabbage into their diet as a cooked vegetable, including the Dakota, Haisla, Cherokee, Kitasoo, Hanaksiala, Seminole and Okanagan-Colville. (The Rappahannock Indians seem to have had an unexpected, and one wonders if smelly, use for the leaves – they put them under their hats to give extra protection from the sun.) Both the Cherokee and Rappahannock tribes developed medicinal uses for cabbage leaf poultices the former applied them to boils and the latter applied them to the head to ease headaches.

A popular superstition, still subscribed to by some, contends that cabbage should not be eaten on St. Stephen's Day (26th December) as the saint is supposed to have hidden in a field of cabbages when trying to escape his persecutors.

It was the custom in Europe in the past, when a cabbage was harvested, to cut the shape of the cross in the piece of stalk left in the ground. This, it was believed, would not only encourage the growth of new shoots but would also protect the plant from the devil. A cabbage also provided one with the opportunity to foretell future wealth. In the dark, using the left hand, the whole cabbage had to be pulled up, and the greater the amount of earth clinging to the roots, the richer were the financial prospects. And cabbage also featured in marriage divination, most of the rituals for which involved pulling up cabbages under varying specified conditions. In the past also it was traditional in French country communities to take cabbage soup to newly-wed couples in the early morning after their bridal night. This was a very old practice compared with the more recent 19th Century French whimsy that babies are found in the cabbage patch.

The actual cultivation of cabbages also generated superstitions. In Illinois, in North America, it was planted with the words

As round as my head,

And as big as my butt!.

– and from there north to Nova Scotia where it was believed that frost would pose no threat if the plants set under a Friday new moon. On the other hand in Europe recalcitrant cabbages, slow to form their heads, would be threatened with execution by scythe-swinging gardeners who crept up on them in the dead of night dressed in their nightshirts.

As cabbages and vines (*Vitis vinifera*) are incompatible cabbages are never allowed to grow in vineyards, or even near them as bees might carry their smell to the fruit.

The Romans recognized the healing properties of cabbages and used the leaves and juice for external treatments. Some centuries later in 1569 Maximilian II (1527-1576) who became Holy Roman Emperor from 1564, suffered an open fracture. Although it is understood that his patient objected, according to German records the emperor's doctor applied a cabbage plaster that is said to have closed the wound in spectacular fashion. Further evidence of respect for the humble cabbage is to be found in various English records. 18th Century English mariners included cabbages in their ships' stores, especially on long journeys, as part of the continuing attempt to circumvent scurvy. They were, for example, to be found on board during the first expedition to the Pacific (1768-1771) made by Captain James Cook (1728-1779) the English navigator. The log following a storm in 1769 is particularly noteworthy as it tells how the ship's doctor applied cabbage leaf compresses to sailors wounded during the weather's onslaught and was able to prevent gangrene setting in. After this experience, not only did Cook ensure that a supply of cabbage, whether fresh or as sauerkraut, formed part of the victuals and that a fresh supply of cabbage was available for the ship's doctor, but the British Navy itself arranged for special sauerkraut magazines to be fitted throughout the Fleet.

Medicinally, European herbalists prescribed a cabbage syrup for coughs, and also used the leaves in plasters on wounds, sciatica and external ulcers. Today folk medicine can still

use cabbage leaf plasters to treat skin ulcers.
It is the birthday flower for 19th September.