

HOME & GARDEN

Broccoli, cauliflower: versatile veggies

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BETWEEN THE ROWS

Broccoli is one of our favorite vegetables, and cauliflower is right up there in the top 10. Last year our crops were so successful that I was able to freeze enough so that we haven't yet finished the supply. (Actually, I thought we had gone all through the broccoli, but after eating our way through a pile of frozen beans these last couple of weeks, I found a whole new cache.)

Preparations for this year's crop actually began in January when I sat pouring through the seed catalogs to decide whether I wanted De Cicco, which is famous for producing many side sprouts after the first harvest. Green Comet, an All-America winner, or one of the other varieties. In the end I opted for Burpee's Green Goliath, which did so well last year. It matured early and ripened over a three-week period so that I was able to keep up with the harvesting and freezing. It also produced a lot of side sprouts, and our Thanksgiving dinner was graced with a bowl of freshly picked broccoli.

Cauliflower is often said to require a little extra care to achieve nice white heads, but I plant a "stovepipe" variety whose leaves grow in such a manner that the head is shaded and remains white. Stovepipe from Johnny's Selected Seeds has worked well for me with very little trouble.

Broccoli and cauliflower seed can be started indoors, early, about four or five weeks before you expect to put them out-

doors. This date will vary with your location, but they are hardy plants and need the cool weather. They can be set out into the garden almost as soon as the soil can be worked. I start seed in flats filled with a seed-starting medium, harden them off either in the cold frame or by setting them out on the porch for longer and longer periods during the day until I'm ready to set them out into the garden.

They like a fairly rich soil, and I prepare my wide rows by digging in rotted manure and compost a couple of weeks before planting. I'm always careful not to locate the rows where any of the cabbage family were grown the year before.

These two crops don't need to be moved from flats into larger containers; I put them directly into the garden. However, care does have to be taken to protect the tender and succulent plants from the cutworm. It's heartbreaking, after having invested a lot of time and effort in these seedlings, to go out and find them littering the ground the morning after they have been planted because cutworms have eaten through the stems.

Making little "collars" for these seedlings is a traditional way of outsmarting these critters, and I have used strips of tarpaper and little tuna fish cans with the top and bottom removed to make mine. I have heard that it

is also possible to wrap a strip of newspaper around the stem at soil level before planting and this is sufficient protection.

One of the most intriguing methods I've heard of is to plant the seedlings with a piece of wire pressed tight against the stem. Apparently, the cutworm does not begin chewing at one spot and work his way around. Somehow he is able to devour them all at once by wrapping himself around it, and if he cannot do this, he can do no damage at all.

Once the plants are established and cutworms are no longer a danger (they attack only very young and tender seedlings), I apply a good mulch. Broccoli and cauliflower prefer coolness and moisture, and a mulch insures both while keeping down the weeds.

When seedlings are well established, I take a section of a wide row and prepare a nursery bed. I cultivate the soil carefully and plant some seeds directly in the garden. They can be planted close together as they would be in a flat. These seedlings are ready for transplanting just about the time some early crop like peas or lettuce is done, leaving a vacant spot in the row.

Succession planting is a good technique for increasing a garden's productivity, but it makes extra demands on the soil. I prepare the bed for this second planting much as I did for the first, digging in rotted manure and compost. This way I am replacing the nutrients that the first crop removed from the soil.

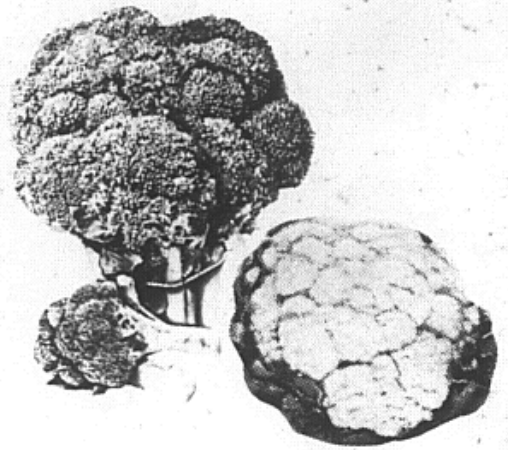
The cabbage looper, a pale green worm that doubles up or "loops" as it crawls can be a problem with all the cole crops. BT or bacillus thuringiensis, which is sold under trade names like Dipel and Biotrol, is a very effective remedy, but it will not harm humans, birds or pets.

Finally it is time to harvest. Broccoli is at its peak while the clusters of flower buds are tight and green. Once the flowers start to bloom it starts to go by. For this reason it is important to keep a close watch on your plants when they begin to reach a good size.

Don't pull the whole broccoli plant out of the garden when you cut off that first main head. The side shoots will continue to form smaller heads that can be harvested as they mature.

Remember to watch the cauliflower too, so that the head does not pass its prime and start to separate and become "ricey." If you have not planted a self-blanching variety, tie the leaves loosely around the head with twine about a week before you expect the head will be ready for harvest. Check the head every couple of days until it is blanched, and remember that it is better to pick it a little too early than a little too late.

Broccoli and cauliflower are versatile vegetables and can be eaten raw or naked with just a little butter. On the other hand they can go into a quiche, prepared au gratin or even curried. That's a lot to get from vegetables that are so easy to grow in the garden.



Collector's Item

I HOPE YOU DON'T MIND IF I PAY YOU ALL IN PENNIES, SONNY?

...OH NOT AT ALL, SIR— I HOPE YOU DON'T MIND IF I DELIVER YOUR PAPER A PAGE AT A TIME?