

For easier reference buy the award-winning book, *The Family Kitchen Garden*

CAULIFLOWER

Brassica oleracea Botrytis group – Cabbage family

***, half hardy

A cauliflower head is the plant's flower bud hidden in the midst of the leaves. As with cabbages, you can have cauliflowers throughout the year by choosing the right varieties, but we have to admit that cauliflowers are not particularly easy to grow, they need really good soil and plenty of water. They also prefer cool summers and they need to be picked punctually, or they have a tendency to bolt. And they take up quite a bit of room. If you are short of space, skip this one.

But if you like a challenge, try it – you can reward yourself with the freshest and most delicious cauliflower cheese ever.

'Cauliflower is nothing but cabbage with a college education'. Mark Twain

SOIL AND POSITION

- Humus-rich, deeply dug and well-drained soil.
- Dig in half-rotted compost or half-rotted manure in autumn or winter, lime – let the soil settle for at least three months before planting.
- Before planting in do not fork over, just rake.

SOWING, PLANTING AND SPACING

	sowing	planting out	harvesting	time to maturity	
early summer varieties	February-March, indoors (late winter-early spring)	from mid-April (spring)	from July (mid summer)	5 months	best for areas with cool summers
late summer/ autumn varieties	April-mid May outdoors (spring-late spring)	May to June (late spring to early summer)	from August (late summer)	4 months	best for areas with cool summers
winter varieties	May outdoors (late spring)	from June (early summer)	from March (early spring) following year	10 months	best for areas with mild winters and hot summers

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- Sow into trays or modules; prick them out into individual pots when they are big enough to handle.
- Seedlings are ready for planting out when they have 5 or 6 leaves. Plant very carefully with as much old soil around them as possible, as they don't like being transplanted. Make sure to plant them deeply, with the lower leaves just above soil level. Plant firmly and water in well.
- 60cm/24in between plants for summer and autumn varieties.
75cm/30in between plants for winter varieties.
- Seed can be stored for up to 4 years.

AFTERCARE

- Net against pigeons.
- Mulch with half-rotted compost.
- Water regularly; if their growth is checked because of a lack of water they won't form proper heads.
- Check regularly for slugs.
- As soon as the curd (the edible head) is the size of a tennis ball, bend a few leaves over to protect it from summer sun and prevent it from discolouring or bolting. Do the same with winter varieties to protect them from frost and snow.
- Remove yellowing leaves immediately to prevent the spread of pests and diseases. This is especially important during winter.
- For over-wintering cauliflowers, earth up the soil a few weeks after planting, this provides stability and protection over winter. In cold areas cover with cloches. Top dress in early spring with organic chicken pellets, 50g/sqm.

COMPANION PLANTING

See cabbages.

PROBLEMS

See brassica problem page.

TIME TO MATURITY

- Summer and autumn varieties: 4-5 months.
- Winter varieties: 10-12 months.

HARVESTING

- The big white curd is actually a huge flower bud, and it can be tricky to pick the right moment. Keep waiting too long for them to grow even larger, and then one morning you find the florets have already separated and you missed your moment. Although you can still eat the florets, but it just doesn't look the same any more.

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USES

- The old classic – but delicious - cauliflower cheese, fritters (dipped in egg and breadcrumbs), or steamed cauliflower sprigs served with vinaigrette and chives as a salad.

STORAGE

- For about one week in the fridge.
- You can also pull out whole plants including roots, shake off earth and hang them in a cool room or shed where they should keep for about three weeks.
- Also suitable for freezing – divide into sprigs and blanch.

VARIETIES

There are varieties that are almost pure white and others which are rather yellow but we think a white cauliflower just looks better on your plate. There is also a rather stylish purple one.

Summer varieties –

- ‘Aviron’ – big white heads, good tolerance of temperature changes. AGM
- ‘Graffiti’ – purple heads, something different. AGM
- ‘Snowball’ – firm white heads, but not particularly big. Ready from June.

Autumn varieties

- ‘Belot’ F1 – large compact white heads, very late autumn, AGM.
- ‘Skywalker’ F1 – white, quick to mature, AGM.

Winter varieties – better for areas with hot and dry summers and mild winters

- ‘Patriot’ – medium sized heads, May. AGM

RELATIVES

Romanesco – one of the most stunning vegetables: lime green heads with florets that grow in spirals - and an outstanding flavour. In many seed catalogues they are listed under ‘Calabrese’ (for reasons unknown).

- ‘Minaret’ – for summer cropping, AGM
- ‘Romanesco Natalino’ – autumn cropping.