

“Vegetable of the Week”

Bok Choy by Denise Bennett

Latin name: *Brassica rapa var. chinensis*

Common names: Chinese cabbage, bok choy, pak choi, pok choi

Family: Brassicaceae

Bok choy (American English version) is just one of the names used for the Asian vegetables found in this group. Other names include pak choi, Chinese celery cabbage, Chinese white cabbage, mustard cabbage and choysum. Usually they are characterized by a loose head of green leaves with white stalks. The varieties can range from 3- 4 inches tall to 24 inches tall, with leaves colored anywhere from dark green to light green, and stalks white to pale green.



Bok choy is an amazing vegetable that is extremely versatile in how it can be used. The leaves can be harvested when they are young and cooked in stir fry fashion or eaten raw in salads. The entire plant can be harvested when young, mature, or flowering. Bok choy is ready to be harvested as a whole plant in 45-60 days. If you slice the plant off about an inch above the ground, the plant should re-sprout for you. Regardless of the time of harvest, the plant is delicious seasoned, then grilled, roasted or sautéed. My favorite recipe using bok choy is Spicy Shrimp with Bok Choy, and can be found at <https://www.rachaelraymag.com/recipe/spicy-shrimp-and-bok-choy>. Bok choy is low in calories and contains high levels of vitamin A, C and K and is ranked #2 among vegetables in nutrient density. Basically, there are only good things to say about adding bok choy to your vegetable garden.

Bok choy is a biennial plant, that can be easily grown from seed or seedlings. If frost is a concern, begin seed indoors 4-5 weeks before you last frost date. If direct sowing, begin one to two weeks before the last frost date. Seeds will germinate in 4-8 days. If transplanting seedlings, wait until temperatures remain above 50 degrees or prepare to cover them. If they think they have been through a frost, they will bolt to seed. My neighbor planted his bok choy from seed in a deck planter box (see picture) and harvests the leaves he wants to use on a daily basis. Bok choy is considered a cool season plant that tolerates light frosts – perfect for Virginia. With a USDA range of 3-12, it actually does well in most climates. Seeds should be sown about ¼ inch deep in early spring for a summer crop and in mid to late summer for a fall crop. Plant separation for seeds or seedlings will depend on the harvesting plan. Immature plants can be harvested as whole plants, in which case spacing can be much closer together than plants whose leaves are harvested on an ongoing basis.



Bok choy can be grown in full sun, but prefers partial shade with 3-5 hours of sun per day. Bok choy are heavy feeders, so well-draining soil with rich organic matter in pH range of 6.4-7.0 is ideal. Consistent watering is a must; drought will cause bok choy to bolt to seed. Bok choy is not usually affected the most common brassica diseases, but it is attractive to insect pests. Cabbage loopers and cabbage worms, flea beetles, slugs, whiteflies, and aphids are most likely.

Photos by Denise Bennett

References:

Missouri Botanical Gardens - Plant Finder

The Spruce <https://www.thespruce.com>

Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bok_choy

June 2020