

It's time for me, once again, to sing the praises of kale. My favorite way to cook it is lightly sautéed with garlic. I get some olive oil warm in a skillet and add sliced garlic. Freshly washed kale gets chopped horizontally and fills up the pan. A few flips with the spatula, a pinch of salt and a dollop of butter, and in a few minutes it is perfect.

But kale's real asset is its winter hardiness. As the old man blows single digits at us, there is still no need to worry. A bit of tobacco plant bed cover over the kale keeps it alive and deliciously edible. I put two covers on as winter progresses. Anytime we want kale we can pull off the polyspun fabric and harvest fresh green leaves.

If it weren't for hardy kale, I would feel the need to have a green house. I like to eat greens every few days; they make me feel good. We've said good-bye to turnips, lettuce, and the whole array of Chinese vegetables, but the kale is looking, and tasting, better all the time.

Kale is sown in late summer, anywhere from July to the beginning of September. Out late September plantings never matured. They'll produce leaves next spring for abundant harvest in March and April.

A special treat for us is when the kale starts to flower. It sends up a stalk, and the flowerbud looks exactly like a tiny broccoli. We gather a bunch of them and eat them just like broccoli. Because it is so early in the spring, the kale flower buds don't fill up with the green cabbage loopers like broccoli does. We call them "brockaley."

Spring turns to Summer, and so the kale goes to seed. The stalks are cut and thrown on a tarp in the barn to dry for a few months. When it's time to plant kale, we thresh out the seed.

First, we do the stalk walk and tromp on the kale. Then the stalks are removed and the tarp is lifted on the corners and shaken. Kale seeds are spherical, and the little balls roll to the center and bottom. More trash is scooped off of the top. We finish by pouring the seeds off of the loft from one bucket to another while the wind blows the rest of the chaff away.

As soon as the rows of spring planted vegetables fade away, they are resown with kale. Into a shallow furrow I sprinkle seed and press it in with my footsteps. Dry soil is raked on top. By firming the seed with my feet it takes enough soil moisture to sprout, because the dry soils on top acts as mulch. The tiny kale seedlings then wait patiently for moisture and the cool days of Autumn to fulfill their mission, which is to make me happy.

In the early 1980's, the Tennessee Organic Growers Association would have a seed swap at their annual meetings. Shannon brought this flat-leafed kale that easily over-wintered for her. She did not offer it, she insisted we take some and try it. I am sure thankful I did, because I've been growing it ever since.

What a plant! For no cost, except a little garden space and time, we have found fresh greens to eat from September to May. Kale loves to grow. It volunteers along paths and edges where seeds have dropped. I have to weed it out in the spring when I'm trying to grow other vegetables. It is very nutritious. It'll probably be growing on the farm long after I'm gone, feeding and inspiring others to buttery flattery.