

Home Garden Brussels Sprouts

By Bob Westerfield, University of Georgia Horticulturist

Brussels sprouts belong to the cole crop family, which includes cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower, and several leafy greens. The name Brussels comes from the city Brussels, Belgium, where the vegetable first became popular. Brussels sprouts are a cool season vegetable that can be grown both in the fall and early spring. They also take a long time to mature, which can make them a little bit of a challenge for the home gardener. For ease of growth, select and use transplants that are young and vigorous.



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Varieties

It is important to choose the best variety available when looking to grow Brussels sprouts. Varieties such as Jade Cross E, Long Island Improved, Prince Marvel, and Valiant have a 90 day maturity rate. Jade Cross E has large sprouts and is easy to harvest. Long Island Improved is open-pollinated and is an old-time variety. Royal Marvel has 85 days to maturity, is very productive, and has tight sprouts.

Soil Preparation and Fertilization

Like most vegetables, Brussels sprouts require a minimum of six hours of sunlight daily. They prefer a fertile, well-drained, organic soil but will tolerate a wide range of soils. Brussels sprouts grow best in a soil that has a pH of 6.2 to 6.8. Submitting a soil test through your local University of Georgia Cooperative Extension office would be the best way to determine the pH of the soil and other fertility requirements.

Brussels sprouts grow best when planted as transplants in late summer or early spring. You should plant Brussels sprouts 15 to 18 in. apart in rows with about 30 in. between rows. Brussels sprouts are fairly heavy feeders, so they will need a heavy fertilization at planting time and several other applications evenly spaced out during the growing season to keep them producing. Boron is a minute nutrient used in small quantities by all plants but is particularly essential in developing good Brussels sprouts. Boron can be added by purchasing a premium fertilizer that contains micronutrients or by dissolving one level tablespoon of borax in 5 quarts of water and sprinkling it over a 50-sq-ft area. Fertilizer should be applied at planting time, and then additional nitrogen should be added when plants are about 12 in. tall. Re-fertilize with nitrogen every 3 to 4 weeks to keep plants producing.

Irrigation and Temperature

Irrigate Brussels sprouts frequently enough to keep the soil slightly moist, particularly during warmer periods of plant development. Mulching around plants with straw or wood chips will help conserve moisture and also reduce weed competition.

When temperatures get too warm, Brussels may become bitter. When the tops of the plants reach a height of 24 in. or more, pinch out the top portion of the plant to aid in forcing more energy down into the plant and into the Brussels sprouts themselves. These plants are cold hardy and can withstand a freeze. They can also be left on the plants and harvested on an as needed basis throughout the winter.

Managing Pests

While Brussels sprouts are not that difficult to grow, they do take a substantial amount of time before they begin to produce. Most Brussels sprouts do not bare sprouts until 90 to 100 days. During that time there are several issues you may need to concern yourself with. Keep a watchful eye for cabbage loopers and other caterpillar-like insects that will find their way into the developing heads and leaves of your plants and cause a lot of damage. You can control these larvae with organic products such as Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis*). Bt is sold under the trade names of Dipel or Thuricide. Other insects to be on the lookout for include aphids or flea beetles. Aphids suck out vital nutrients and flea beetles eat needed foliage. Both can be controlled with organic options or traditional insecticides. See the current homeowner edition of the [“Georgia Pest Management Handbook” \(UGA Extension Special Bulletin 48\)](#) for more information.

Occasionally, Brussels sprouts can also experience some disease problems. They are susceptible to Fusarium wilt, blackleg, and black rot, which can all cause your crops to fail. Growing resistant varieties and using registered fungicides can help reduce the incidence of these diseases. Using drip irrigation or soaker hoses will also help keep foliage dry, which in turn helps to limit the conditions needed for a disease to occur.



Cabbage looper (*Trichoplusia ni*). Image by David Cappaert, Michigan State University, Bugwood.org.



Flea beetle (*Aphthona seriata*). Image by USDA Agricultural Research Service, USDA Agricultural Research Service, Bugwood.org.

Harvesting and Storage

Brussels sprouts should be harvested as soon as their diameter is large enough (when they reach 1.5 to 2 in. in diameter or the size of a quarter). Remove them by twisting them off the plant, which will help prevent damaging the edible portion of the fruit, starting from the bottom and working your way upward. Remove some of the bottom leaves and stems as you harvest your way up the trunk. Continue to harvest Brussels sprouts in this manner all the way through the growing season. Store harvested Brussels sprouts in the refrigerator until they are ready to be cooked. They can also be frozen; for instructions, see the Family and Consumer Sciences publication “Preserving Food: Freezing Vegetables” (FDNS-E-43-5).

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