



Vegetable by any other name

Broccoli Rabe

Broccoli rabe ready for harvest. This green grows in early spring when few other leafy greens are available.

Story and Photography
By Jeanne Grunert

Broccoli *what?* Is it broccoli? Or a leafy green vegetable? Or something else entirely? Broccoli rabe – also called broccoli raab, rapini, rapi, cime de rapi, and many other names – is a cruciferous vegetable related to turnips, which explains why in some countries it is called “turnip tops.” But to confuse you even further, the roots of broccoli rabe never form an edible vegetable. Instead, the stalks, leaves, stems, and small florets are harvested and used in a variety of Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese dishes.

Gardeners who love leafy green vegetables enjoy growing rabe as an early spring green. You’d be hard-pressed to find broccoli rabe at the local supermarket, but you might find it at a gourmet grocery or farmers’ market in the spring or fall. The taste is bitter, somewhat like a turnip green but uniquely “rabe.” Some people describe the taste as peppery, but I find adjectives fail me when trying to describe the flavor to those who haven’t sampled this gourmet green. Once you’ve tried it, however, be warned – you’ll crave it time and time again.

GROWING BROCCOLI RABE

Broccoli rabe grows best from seeds directly sown into the garden in early spring. It prefers loamy soil but tolerates a wide range of soil types. Soil pH should be between 6.0 to 6.5.

Rabe likes a compost-rich soil but dislikes commercial fertilizers. You can top-dress it lightly with 10-10-10 during the growing season, but it’s unnecessary if your garden soil is amended before planting with manure and compost.

Rabe tolerates light frost, but requires protection from heavy frost, ice, and snow storms. Typically, it can be sown approximately six to eight weeks before the last frost date for your region.

Plant seeds 1-3 inches apart in rows approximately 18-36 inches apart. Sow seeds thinly and cover with just a little bit of soil. Water well and keep the seeds evenly moist until germination.

Once the plants germinate, thin them out if they’re clustered together. The stalks grow rapidly and are ready to harvest in 60 to 65 days. Harvest broccoli rabe when the tiny florets appear but before they open into small, yellow

flowers. All aboveground parts of the plant are edible: leaves, stalks, stems, florets. However, the stalks and stems can be tough.

To harvest rabe, snip the top portion of the plant stem with a clean pair of scissors. Cut only what you need, as the plant will continue to grow until hot weather sets in. It will go to seed once the daytime temperatures are consistently 80 F and higher. Once the plant goes to seed, it becomes too bitter and tough to eat. The entire plant can be pulled up and discarded. Some gardeners start their tomato plants between the rabe plants so that when the rabe is finished, their tomatoes are already in place.

PESTS AND DISEASES

Broccoli rabe is susceptible to many of the same pests as other cruciferous vegetables, especially turnips, but they are rarely bothered. Aphids, cabbage worms, and flea beetles are the main pests but are easily controlled by floating row covers, which keep them off of the plants, or manually, such as picking cabbage worms off the leaves or using



▲ Chop the leaves and stems into small pieces before cooking.



▲ Rabe is rarely bothered by insects. The leaves here on this freshly washed bunch of organically grown broccoli rabe are nearly perfect.



▲ The floret (center) resembles broccoli but never forms large, tight bunches. Small florets may also grow along the stems.

a garden hose to knock aphids off the plants.

According to the North Carolina Cooperative Extension there are no herbicides cleared as safe to use around broccoli rabe plants. Weed by hand if needed during the growing season.

ENJOYING AND STORING RABE

Cook rabe almost immediately after harvesting. Any leftover raw vegetables can be stored for a few days in the coolest part of the refrigerator.

You can freeze broccoli rabe after it is cleaned, cut, and blanched. Blanching halts enzyme activity that can cause foods to spoil or turn brown in freezer storage. To blanch broccoli rabe, cut the stalks and

dice them into 2-3-inch pieces containing leaves, stems, and florets. Place them in boiling water for two minutes and then quickly remove the rabe and dunk in an ice bath for one minute. Pat dry and place blanched rabe in labeled and dated freezer bags. Rabe stores well up to six months or more if blanched properly.

Broccoli rabe may not be as famous as its namesake nor as popular as its cousin the turnip green, but for those who love leafy green veggies, it packs a powerful nutrient punch and is an easy to grow green at a time of the year when few others are ready for harvest. Give it a try this spring or fall. Seed may be found at your local garden center or through mail order or internet sources. ♻️



Broccoli rabe may not be a staple of American cuisine, but it is popular in Italy, Spain, and Portugal. To cook your harvest, follow these simple directions.

1. Cut rabe stems and harvest about 6 inches or more of the top portion of the plant, including leaves, stem, and florets.
2. Rinse and pat dry with a paper towel.
3. Cut into 2-3-inch pieces. Include the stems for young broccoli rabe; discard them if they are tough.
4. Heat 1 tablespoon of olive oil in a skillet. Sauté rabe in olive oil two to five minutes, stirring frequently so it does not stick to the pan. Like other greens, the raw rabe will cook down into a much smaller portion, so plan accordingly if feeding several people.
5. Mince one garlic clove and add it to the pan the last 30 seconds of cooking, stirring constantly.
6. Remove from the heat and serve with a sprinkle of Parmesan or Romano cheese.

Cooked rabe combines well with pasta and is often served with pasta and sausage or just with cooked sausage. One popular Italian dish is a sandwich of sausage, rabe cooked with garlic, on fresh bread.

Jeanne Grunert is an avid gardener, herbalist, and writer. She's the author of *Plan and Build a Raised Bed Vegetable Garden* (available on Amazon) and runs the popular gardening website, Home Garden Joy (www.homegardenjoy.com). She lives and works on a 17-acre farm in south central Virginia with her husband, John, and a menagerie of rescued pets.