

6. Broccoli ‘Romanesco’

Brassica oleracea botrytis

Drusius, son of the Roman Emperor Tiberius, craved broccoli prepared in the then-popular “Apician” way to such an alarming degree that for an entire month he ate nothing else, causing his urine to turn a brilliant green and his father to take him to brutal task for his “precarious living.”

Although it is usually assumed that broccoli is Italian by birth and it is, in fact, an ancient Etruscan cultivar, broccoli were actually first brought into culture by the Rasenna, who came to Italy from what is now Turkey in the eighth century B.C. They settled in what we now know as Tuscany, the broccoli they cultivated reaching Rome sometime before the fifth century A.D., when Roman farmers glowingly referred to it as “the five green fingers of Jupiter.” It was also these early Romans who first referred to the Rasenna as “Tusci” or “Etrusci” and to ancient Tuscany as “Etruria.” The ancient Rasenna proved to be active traders with the Greeks, Sicilians, Corsicans, and Sardinians, and so broccoli spread rapidly throughout the Greco-Roman empire.

The Tuscan-born Catherine de Medici is believed to have introduced broccoli into France, along with the artichoke and other vegetables, upon her marriage to Henry II in 1533, but the first mention of broccoli in France doesn’t occur until 1560. In 1699, the English

herbalist John Evelyn reported in his *Acetaria* that “the broccoli from Naples, perhaps the Halmerida of Pliny (or Athenoeus rather)...are very delicate...commended for being not so rank, but agreeable to most palates and of better nourishment.” In 1724, Miller’s *Gardener’s Dictionary* gave another early account of broccoli, referring to it as “a stranger” in England and as “sprout colli-flower” or “Italian asparagus.”

Broccoli, as a member of the *Brassica* family, is in fact closely related to cauliflower, cabbage, and Brussels sprouts, so closely in both form and genetic disposition that botanists have always had difficulty with their classification. To confuse matters further, historically, broccoli, cabbage, and cauliflower were all referred to as the catchall “colewort” so, throughout their ancient travels in Europe and subsequently the New World, the three were often confused. All *Brassic*as share a common feature in that their four-petaled flowers bear a resemblance to a Greek cross, which is why they are frequently referred to as “crucifers.” The name “broccoli” comes from the Latin *bracchium*, meaning “strong arm” or “branch,” broccoli having many strong “branches” or “arms” growing from the stout main stem.

Broccoli ‘Romanesco’ is an ancient and especially beautiful variety with architectural-almost-to-the-point-of-other-worldly, spiraling, apple-green whorls composing its truly remarkable head. Due to this densely budded, nearly cauliflowerlike aspect, many botanists place this variety in that ill-defined *Brassica* shadowland of the “broccoliflower,” a place somewhere between broccoli and cauliflower. However, in all opinions, the beauteous

Broccoli 'Romanesco,' like all broccolis, is a jewel of nutrition, being uncommonly rich in vitamin A, potassium, folacin, iron, fiber, beta-carotene, and a host of anticarcinogens, and is thought to possess better flavor and texture than more common broccoli types.

A notable success in northern climes, Broccoli 'Romanesco' should be started indoors 4 weeks before your frost date, then plant out after danger of frost 15 inches apart in fertile soil. Expect to start harvesting 75 to 100 days from transplant. In terms of cooking, why not try it in the ancient Apician style so dear to young Drusus: steam or boil till tender, then "bruise with a mixture of cumin and coriander seeds, chopped onion, plus a few drops of oil and sun-made wine." Try not to overindulge.



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