

ASIAN VEGETABLES



Asian vegetables have been in New Zealand since the Chinese first settled here in the late 1800s.

There are hundreds of varieties of Asian vegetables, however; only some varieties reach retail stores on a regular basis. The varieties listed below are the most commonly found.

Choy is the Chinese word for any leafy vegetable. Asian greens have also been called cabbage – even though they don't resemble Western cabbages. The names of Asian vegetables can be confusing as they are called different names in different areas of China. For example, Chinese white cabbage is called bok choy, buk choy, pak choi or baak choi. These vegetables team well with the usual Asian condiments – soy, ginger, black bean, hoisin and oyster sauce.



Chinese white cabbage

(bok choy, buk choy, pak choi, baak choi)

All types of bok choy are suitable for quick cooking methods such as steaming and stir frying. Use like cabbage or spinach. Miniature bok choy leaves are used in some green salad mixes.



In New Zealand the most common Asian green is white bok choy. White bok choy has thick, white, crisp and juicy stems and smooth round leaves similar in texture to cabbage or silverbeet.



Shanghai bok choy

Shanghai bok choy has thick, green stems and similar leaves to white bok choy, but is smaller in size.



Peking cabbage

(wong nga pak, wong nga baak or wong bok)

Peking cabbage has an elongated shape with crisp, juicy stalks and pale green, crisp leaves not unlike cos lettuce which form a heavy, compact head. Peking cabbage can be used raw in salads, or cooked in various ways, but it is most commonly used in fast cooking methods such as stir frying.



Chinese flat cabbage

(Tat soi – Japanese name, Rosette bok choy or taai goo choi)

Chinese flat cabbage is round, relatively flat like a plate, with a stronger flavour and slightly tougher texture than Chinese white cabbage. Choose smaller cabbages with lots of young leaves clustered at the centre. Chinese flat cabbage suits quick moist cooking methods. The young centre leaves can be used raw in a salad. Miniature tat soi is regularly found in mesclun salad mixes.



Garland chrysanthemum

(tung ho, tong ho, chong ho or thong ho)

The leafy stalks of Garland chrysanthemum are similar to Chinese cabbage, but the leaves are bluntly lobed and the stalks look more like a lettuce but feel slightly rough in texture. Garland chrysanthemum leaves have a subtle, but distinct, 'floral' flavour which is best enjoyed in small quantities, accompanied by other flavours. It should be cooked only briefly. Garland chrysanthemum is a winter vegetable which is generally used in a stir fry or in soup.



Flowering Chinese cabbage (choy sum or choy sum)

Flowering Chinese cabbage has pale yellow flowers on long thin green stems (15–20 cm long) with small green leaves. It is available all year round. Prepare flowering Chinese cabbage like broccoli using quick cooking methods. Use all parts of the stem, including the flowers. It is best to eat choy sum when the flowers are in bud rather than in full bloom.



Chinese box thorn (gau gei choy)

This vegetable has a straight unbranched stem and is closely covered by small oval leaves, and in some varieties, thorns. The branches are usually 25–30 cm long. Use only the leaves and discard the stems. Chinese box thorn is generally used only for soups where it imparts a distinct flavour. Supply is limited.



Chinese broccoli (Chinese sprouting broccoli, Chinese kale – gai lan)

Chinese broccoli has long green stems (about 2 cm in diameter and 20 cm long), white flowers and green leaves which have a white haze on them. The flowers should be in bud rather than in full bloom. To prepare, chop the leaves roughly. Peel the stem to get rid of the fibrous layer and cut into evenly-sized pieces. Stir frying or steaming are the most common cooking methods. It has a very strong broccoli flavour and can be used instead of broccoli.

Mustard cabbage (gai choy, or kai choy)

There are many varieties of mustard cabbage – some are grown for their oil, others for seed and others for their highly nutritious mustard-flavoured leaves. Most mustard cabbages are found only in Asian markets. The leaves are predominantly used in stir fries, pickles or soups. Traditionally it is poached in chicken stock and served as a broth. The most commonly found mustard cabbage is the large-leafed Swatow variety with thick fleshy ribs which are usually the same grass-green colour from base to tip.



Water spinach (ong choy)

Water spinach stems are hollow and the leaves are arrow shaped. They taste slightly similar to spinach. The shorter the stalks, the larger the leaves at the tip, the more tender are the leaves. Discard the lowest 5–6 cm of the stems if they are tough or fibrous. Chop stems into thirds, keeping the stem and leaves roughly separated. Cook the stems first as they need more cooking, then add the leaves. Water spinach is used in a variety of ways, e.g. soups, stir fries, or raw. Try stir frying with garlic and chilli, and stir in coconut cream once the leaves have wilted.

Amaranth (Chinese spinach and en choy)

Many varieties of amaranth are grown and sold in bunches with the roots still attached. The green leaves have deep red coloured veins which distinguish red amaranth from other Asian greens. Green amaranth is also available. Cook like spinach; it suits short quick moist cooking methods but also goes well in soups. It is very nutrient-rich.

Fuzzy melon (also known as hairy melon)

This hairy green-skinned gourd is shaped like a marrow or overgrown eggplant. The skin is edible but is usually peeled or the hairs rubbed off with a paper towel. The flesh has a fresh cucumber-like taste with a marrow-like texture. Remove the seeds and treat as a marrow; stuffed, cut into slices, stir fried or added to soups.

What to look for

All Asian greens should be clean, fresh and crisp. Flowering varieties are best when in bud, rather than full bloom.

Store

Refrigerate in plastic bags.

Nutrition

Most Asian vegetables are a good source of vitamins C and K, and contain dietary fibre and potassium. Chinese cabbage is also a good source of vitamin A (from beta-carotene), considerably higher compared to other Asian vegetables. Small amounts of iron and calcium are found in the leafy greens such as Chinese cabbage, Amaranth, Chinese broccoli

and Chrysanthemum leaves. While fuzzy melon is a good source of vitamin C it is low in other nutrients. Asian vegetables contain many phytonutrients including carotenoids, flavonoids and phenolic acids. Glucosinolates are present in Brassicas such as Chinese broccoli and bok choy.

How to prepare

See individual types above.

Suggested cooking methods

Depending on individual types: braise, boil, microwave, steam, stew, stir fry, stuff.

Available

All year.

Retailing

Like other green leafy vegetables, Asian greens are highly perishable so they need to be handled with extreme care. Buy small quantities regularly. Sprinkle with water to minimise moisture loss. Trim butt ends daily. Customers may not know how to use Asian vegetables, so use the QR code on labels.

Store at 2–4°C with a relative humidity of 90–100%. The optimum storage temperature is 0°C, but because of the risk of freezing, a slightly higher temperature is recommended. Store these products at 7–9°C to avoid chilling damage.