

Cabbage

The English name cabbage comes from the French *caboché*, meaning head, referring to its round head-like form, but as with most vegetables, we wouldn't recognize it in its earliest form. The ancestral cabbage didn't have a head, it was a scarce looking Mediterranean plant that looked more like its relative, the modern kale. Although cabbage is often connected to the Irish, the Celts brought cabbage to Europe from Asia around 600 B.C. And by the time Pliny the Elder was writing in the 1st century AD, there were cabbages with 12" diameter heads. Pliny also talks about the plant's medicinal and healing properties by using cabbage leaves or juice applied externally. Whilst Cato, another ancient Roman advised one to eat plenty of raw cabbage seasoned with vinegar before a banquet at which one plans to "drink deep." It seems even the ancient Egyptians advised starting the meal with raw cabbage, to keep one sober which could be the reason it has also found such popularity in the vodka loving Russian states! This concept actually has some validity from a modern perspective since cabbage aids in the breakdown of toxins in the liver.

Taking only three months growing time, one acre of cabbage will yield more edible vegetables than any other plant. It is little wonder then that this vegetable found such universal popularity amongst the farmers of Europe and by the time of the middle ages, it was found on dinner tables from Egypt to India. More than just a food however, it came to be called: 'poor man's medicine chest' and the 'doctor of the poor'. By the eighteenth century, cabbages were being loaded onto ships for long voyages. The vitamin C helped to stave off scurvy, which the Dutch first conquered as their sailors alone did not succumb to this terrible form of malnutrition due to their high appetite for sauerkraut. It had other uses as well, as Captain Cook discovered while on his first voyage; when a violent storm injured 40 of his crew and the ship's doctor used compresses of cabbage to prevent gangrene in their wounds. Used externally cabbage plasters have also been used as a remedy for sciatica and varicose ulcers, with these healing properties being traced to the same elemental sulphur that accounts for its awful smell. Sulphur may also account for the wound healing properties discovered by Captain Cook as it is a powerful disinfectant and skin medicine.

Cabbage poultices have long been used to treat a broad range of skin conditions from wounds, burns and scalds, boils and carbuncles, ulcers, blisters, cold sores, shingles, and bites and stings. Its anti-inflammatory action can benefit swollen and painful joints including bruises and sprains, and help relieve the pain of neuralgia, sciatica, toothache, headaches, migraines, and lumbago. Traditionally, it was chopped finely and applied over the abdomen and left overnight to treat peptic ulcers and bowel problems. Whilst applied during the day to the lower abdomen, it was thought useful in soothing cystitis and renal colic and the relief of fluid retention. Fresh juice can also be used as a diuretic and antiseptic for the urinary tract and to ease fluid retention and to reduce or prevent kidney stones, arthritis, and gout. Cabbage poultices, were also taken to relieve the pain and soreness of a harsh cough; and, if the poultices were applied to the throat, they were used to help soothe tonsillitis and laryngitis. It is also a very popular remedy amongst breast feeding mothers to relieve painful swollen breasts. To make a poultice, cut out the midrib of a leaf and either iron it, lightly steam it, or boil it for 60 seconds. Place while still hot onto the area to be treated, being careful not to have it too hot or to leave it on too long to avoid burns.

- The Barefoot Doctor