

“Cabbage” by any other name...

Basic Information to Help Identify Chinese Greens

NJ Department of Environmental Protection
Pesticide Control Program
Pesticide Evaluation and Monitoring

“Different vegetables are often called the same name, the same vegetable is called by several names, and botanists are still arguing about which is correct!” (Joy Larkcom, author of *Oriental Vegetables: The Complete Guide for the Gardening Cook*). This is one author’s description of the confusion behind the identification and classification of many of the Chinese vegetables, specifically the Chinese “leafy greens”.

The Chinese “leafy greens” are part of the Brassicaceae (Mustard) family and are quite common in New Jersey. Many of these greens are cool season crops which allows New Jersey growers to increase their early springtime yield, when planted along with crops like asparagus and lettuce. The greens that are part of the Chinese mustard family can be headed, loose-headed, leafy or flowering. Supermarkets are likely to package and sell only the edible portion of the plant, while you are more likely to find the entire plant available at roadside markets or farm markets. These different marketing approaches and the similarities of many of the Chinese leafy greens often makes it difficult to find exactly what you are looking for.

Chinese cabbage is the Chinese mustard most often found in New Jersey and is also commonly known as napa cabbage or wong bok. Considered a headed mustard, this type of cabbage is more barrel shaped, with tight, overlapping leaves. The color of the outer leaves can vary greatly from a very dark green to a delicate pale green. It is typically sold by the head.



Another type of Chinese mustard common in New Jersey is pak choi, also known as bok choy, Chinese celery cabbage and mustard cabbage. Pak choi is a leafy mustard with many variations in size and color. The stems and stalks can be either green or white and stalk shapes vary greatly. The stalks are crisp and tight and the leaves are more open. Smaller versions of these plants are often called baby pak choi or baby bok choy. Pak choi is typically sold as the whole plant.

Flowering brassicas, typically referred to as choy sum, are also common in New Jersey. While the flowering shoots of almost any brassica can be eaten if they are picked when they are still young and tender, there are several brassica varieties that are grown specifically for their flowering shoots, including flowering pak choi. The flowering brassicas are characterized by their yellow flowers and fleshy stalks. The flower stalks are usually light green but can also be white in color. Typically, only the flower stalk is eaten.



Another popular brassica is Chinese broccoli, often called gai lan or Chinese kale. Chinese broccoli is somewhat distinct compared to the other brassicas, with its thick leaves, stout appearance and chunky stems. The stems are more succulent than choy sum stems, and the flowers are usually larger and white in color. The leaves can be green, blue-green or gray in color.

As the diversity of the population along the east coast continues to grow, New Jersey farmers find themselves with an opportunity to expand into the niche market of ethnic vegetables. Consumers, as well as restaurant chefs, are looking to purchase these ethnic specialties to give their cooking and menus a more worldly flair. The demand for Chinese vegetables, specifically the leafy greens used in stir fry and soups, continues to increase and New Jersey growers are beginning to take advantage.