

# Wombok

*Brassica rapa var. pekinensis*

## Otherwise known as...

Chinese cabbage, Celery cabbage, Napa cabbage, Tientsin cabbage, wong nga bok

## Background

Womboks are known to have been cultivated in China since the 5<sup>th</sup> Century and remain one of the most popular vegetables in Asia. Although seeds were taken from China to Europe in the mid 1700's, the wombok remained a curiosity among Europeans until the 1970's when commercial crops were grown in Israel and the Napa valley in California - hence its english name 'Napa cabbage'.

Like broccoli, turnips and many Asian leafy vegetables, womboks belong to the Brassica family. The wombok is not a naturally occurring plant, but is thought to be a cross between a warm climate leafy Brassica species (such as buk choy) and the cool climate turnip. There are tens if not hundreds of varieties, ranging from compact round barrels to long, slim cylinders and many shapes in-between.

## Where and How does it grow?

While most varieties do best under cool conditions, they can be grown at various times of year in every state of Australia. Womboks are field grown and harvested when the heads are firm and appear mature. Home gardeners will know that leaves can be harvested while the wombok is growing, similarly to open hearted lettuces, although the immature leaves can tend to be hairy.

Under ideal conditions (high humidity, 0°C) womboks can be kept with little loss of quality for up to 2 months. Stored in a loosely closed plastic bag in the home refrigerator the inner leaves can keep fresh for several weeks.

## Preparation and Cooking

Womboks have a sweet, mild flavour which is quite different to European cabbage. While the leaf blades can be slightly peppery, the thick white ribs are sweet and juicy. The inner leaves have been protected from the sun, so are particularly tender and succulent.

There is almost no end to the ways wombok can be used. Its sweet flavour and crunchy texture make it perfect for use in a coleslaw, or as a change from shredded lettuce on a sandwich or hamburger. Shredded wombok is also a key ingredient in dumplings and rolls. The famous Korean relish *kim chee* is made from wombok pickled in salt, garlic and chilli. It can also be boiled in a soup, braised in a casserole, or stir fried with other ingredients. The leaves can be used as wrappers for other foods during steaming. As it absorbs flavours during cooking, it is equally at home in a spicy meat dish or a delicately flavoured stir fry with fish or tofu.

## Nutritional Value

Womboks contain significant quantities of calcium, iron, phosphorus and vitamins A and C. Like other brassicas, womboks also contain glucosinolates. This group of sulphur compounds are widely believed to reduce the risks for certain cancers. They may also inhibit some of the factors that can lead to cardiovascular disease.