Kale grows prolifically here in Alaska. But at least once a week, someone calls me to ask what to do with this leafy, strong-flavored green.

Kale is a cool-season, cabbage-family crop and with its frilly leaves and rich colors, it is a gorgeous plant. Although officially a “dark leafy green,” it also comes in vibrant purples and dramatic winter whites. Not only is it loaded with nutrients and easy to grow, newer varieties make an attractive landscape addition to any flower or vegetable garden.

If you were going to eat only one vegetable for your health, kale should be it. Kale is loaded with calcium, iron, and vitamins A, C and K. Also, it has phytonutrients such as sulforaphane and indoles, which may help protect us from cancer.

Here are some general tips to handling kale:

- Wash kale thoroughly by plunging into a deep container of water. Change water until no grit gathers in the bottom. Avoid washing kale until just before use, since it will hasten spoilage.
- To make cutting easier, remove any thick stems (just hold the kale upside down by the stems and pull the leaves off), then stack large greens on top of one another, roll them into tight bundles and slice into desired widths. The stems, finely chopped, can be used in soups.
- Blanching reduces bitterness and softens thick greens, which is useful if you want to follow up with a quick sauté or freeze the greens for later use. To blanch kale, stir leaves into boiling water for two minutes, drain, then cool immediately in cold water.
- Braising tenderizes and adds flavor. To braise, slow cook 1 pound of greens in a 1/2 to 3/4 cup of seasoned cooking liquid (chicken or vegetable stock or wine) or water for about 20 minutes or until greens are tender and ready to eat.
If you want a bit more of a recipe, here are three of my favorites:

1. Crispy Kale Chips — This is a healthy snack alternative to chips. Roasting brings out buttery flavors and the chips will melt in your mouth.

   Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Wash a large bunch of kale. Fold each leaf in half and tear or cut out the tough stem, then stack and slice into manageable-size pieces. Toss pieces in a bowl with 1 Tablespoon olive oil until coated, then arrange in a single layer on a baking sheet. Roast for 15 minutes until kale begins turning brown, crisp and brittle. Remove from oven and sprinkle with salt. More adventurous eaters might want to sprinkle on garlic, lemon pepper, cayenne, or whatever spices you might enjoy. Serve promptly.

2. Asian Greens — This is a quick way to use kale or any dark leafy green (spinach, chard, collards, dandelion greens, etc.).

   Wash three bunches of kale, remove stems and cut into 1-inch pieces. Heat a large sauté pan over medium-high heat and add olive oil to just coat the bottom of the pan. Add 1 cup chopped onions and 2 tablespoons minced garlic and sauté for one to two minutes. Stir in kale, 1 teaspoon fresh grated ginger and 2 cups of flavored stock (vegetable, beef or chicken). Cook until the kale starts to wilt, about two minutes. Stir in 1 Tablespoon soy sauce and 1/8 teaspoon of pepper. Remove from heat and serve.

3. Raw Kale Salad — My friend, Marsha Munsell, recommends mixing lemon and oil to break down the stiffness and bitter flavor of fresh leaves.

   Remove stems from one bunch of kale and slice thinly, about the consistency of slaw. Add 1/4 cup of lemon juice and 1/4 cup olive oil, 1 minced garlic clove and 1/8 teaspoon salt. Mix, rubbing kale leaves thoroughly. You can add toasted walnuts, raisins, olives and shredded basil, if you’d like. Let the salad set and soften for 15 minutes. Enjoy.

Kale is a nutritional storehouse. Make sure that it decorates your plate as well as your garden.

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