

A touch of class

Broccoli, like cabbage and brussels sprouts, is part of the large brassica family. The word is Italian for "stalklets" which is in itself a description of the clusters of flower buds set on stalks among leaves which is known as green or purple sprouting broccoli. The other type is known as curding and is practically identical to its cousin, the similar sounding cauliflower, though the curd is of a coarser texture and is a duller white. The green variety of sprouting broccoli is called calabrese (from Calabria in Italy). It is different in that it produces in late summer a large green central head which must be

cut (and eaten, of course) before the plant will send up mini caulis — a tiny white curd with leaves beneath. When buying broccoli look for heads or spears that are fresh and crisp, and with stems that snap easily. You waste your money buying any that have yellowed for this means that they have lost their valuable vitamin C. Broccoli could not be called your common or garden green but it is becoming popular with home gardeners because it is so easy to grow, and with freezer owners who can buy it readily at freezer centres. It makes a pleasant change from beans and peas when a quickly-prepared meal is needed. Broccoli has always been a favourite of restaurants because it adds a classy and colourful touch to any dish. It's a versatile vegetable because it

can be cooked in a variety of ways, and combines well with other vegetables and sauces.

To prepare broccoli, cut off any wilted leaves and the lower ends of the stalks. If the spears have wilted, stand the stalks (*not* the heads) in water to which 1 teasp (5ml) of both salt and lemon juice have been added. Leave for 15 minutes, then drain and cook.

When cooking broccoli, treat it as asparagus because it takes longer to cook the stalks than it does the tops. Tie the spears in bundles and cook them upright in a tall pan. Or wrap the spears in an airtight foil parcel (add a little butter and a sprinkling of salt as well) and drop it into a pan of boiling water. It takes longer to cook it this way, but it's worth doing if you haven't a steamer and you like your vegetables crisp. To freeze broccoli, always choose top quality spears. Trim them, then blanch for 3 minutes. Place in ice-cold water for the same time, then arrange on trays and open freeze. Pack into polythene bags and seal.

Left: Broccoli as it can be bought — fresh as a head or in spears, or as frozen spears

