

Growing Cauliflower in the Alice Springs Region

Updated by V. Bhat, Research Horticulturist, Alice Springs

VARIETIES

Cauliflowers grow well in the Alice Springs Region and can take from 12 to 22 weeks to mature, depending on the variety. For information on current varieties, time for planting and harvest, check with local nurseries.

PLANTING SEASON

Cauliflowers can be sown from February to September. However, those maturing in hot weather may sometimes have a discoloured curd. Therefore, plant later-maturing varieties early.



SOIL PREPARATION

Dig the soil to a depth which allows you to mix in the compost or animal manure a few weeks before planting. The depth should be sufficient for the adequate establishment, growth and functioning of healthy roots. That way, the organic matter added ahead of planting will have enough time to decompose properly and provide the nutrients to growing cauliflowers.

FERTILISER

Depending on the current available knowledge of the soil, assessed through proper testing, the plants can be provided with the required nutrients by using a single nutrient fertiliser, a combined-nutrient fertiliser or a mixed fertiliser, starting from before planting, to top dressing twice or thrice in the production season. A complete granular NPK (nitrogen: phosphorus: potassium) fertiliser may be an option for an easy start. However, there is a whole range of different types of fertiliser in the market to choose from depending on the objectives of either conventional, minimal, complete organic, or biological farming. During the growing season, three side-dressings of a quick-releasing N source can be applied as a ring around each plant or in a row alongside the plants.

Avoid putting fertiliser (apart from foliar fertiliser) on the leaves of the plant. Always follow the manufacturer's recommendations when applying fertilisers.

PLANTING

Seed can be directly sown in clumps and thinned out. However, it is usually sown in seedling trays, seed-beds, peat pellets, or in small pots and then transplanted. Directly-sown seed can be placed 0.5 to 1 cm deep.

Seedlings can be transplanted when 8 to 10 cm high, discarding the weaker ones. Plant spacing for the larger varieties is 50 cm between plants and 100 cm between rows. The bed should be moist at sowing or transplanting time. Apply about 50 mm (or 50 L/m²) of water just before planting.

WATERING

Frequent watering will be necessary when seed is sown directly until seedlings emerge; twice a day may be necessary in the hottest months. Watering before seedling emergence should be done with a watering-can or very gentle sprinkler so as not to disturb the soil covering the seed.

Mulching between the rows will reduce water loss.

After seedlings emerge, watering should be at two-day intervals. This can be extended up to seven-day intervals for well-grown plants in cooler weather. The water requirement will range from about 15 mm (15 L/m²) every second day for new plantings in summer to about 50 mm (50 L/m²) every five days for well-developed plants in hot weather. About 25 mm (25 L/m²) per seven days is needed for well-developed plants in winter months. Drip irrigation may help save a considerable amount of water by using small amounts daily and also help the plants to cope with salinity by reducing salt build-up while maintaining moisture all the time in the root zone.

Cauliflower plants have a moderate tolerance to saline water. Water with 1.56 dissolved solids/m (1000 ppm or 1000 mg/L) total dissolved solids and slightly over, can be used if leaf wetting is avoided during the day. Drip, basin, or furrow irrigation is preferred when water is over this salinity level.

MANAGEMENT

The area should be kept weed-free and insect pests should be controlled from the beginning. Mulching between plants is recommended. When the curd starts to develop, the outer leaves can be drawn together and tied over to protect it from the sun and maintain the desirable white colour. It may pay to source the self-covering variety through local nurseries, if possible.

INSECT CONTROL

A good start with proper nutrition will enable the plants to grow healthy, leading to very minimum insect infestation. Aphids are the significant pest in the Alice Springs area. If they are present, manage them by spraying with any specific systemic insecticides, including those from organic sources, at their correct dosages as recommended by the manufacturers.

In the home garden, caterpillars can be controlled by picking grubs off plants. Pesticides can be restricted to the minimum or not used at all. Check with the Entomology Section of the Department of Primary Industry and Fisheries for an appropriate chemical control, or refer to www.pestinfo.nt.gov.au

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