

Growing a New Vegetable

By Earl Hockin

There are several advantages to growing your own vegetables. One is the ability to grow varieties or types of vegetables that are not commonly available in grocery stores or farmer's markets. And, if you grow one or two vegetables that you have not previously grown or edibles that are unfamiliar, you will undoubtedly discover a new favorite or two. To learn of new or different vegetable varieties, read online gardening articles, seed catalogues from a variety of different sources, or watch or attend gardening presentations.

One of the unusual edibles that I have grown is yacon or Peruvian ground apple. The plant grows about 4 feet tall and 4 feet wide. Once hit by frost and the leaves have died, dig up the root and harvest the tubers. They are slightly sweet and very crunchy. They are most frequently eaten raw, but can be sauteed, stir fried or steamed and still retain their crunchy texture. After removing the tubers, I put the root back in the ground and heavily mulch it to survive the winter. In April it sprouts up again.

I have also found that several Asian vegetables do very well here and sometimes are less susceptible to common viral and fungal diseases. I really enjoy Shintokiwa cucumbers which are sweet, crisp, and juicy and are great for pickling as well as eating fresh without having to peel the skin. Another is "yard long" or asparagus beans. They typically grow 16" to 20" long. There are several varieties all of which are tasty. I most enjoy them by blanching, to eat or to add to salads, or lightly sauteed. They need to be grown on a trellis as they are vigorous growers. I also enjoy Hakurei turnip, which is a sweet, mild flavored turnip that has crisp, smooth, white and round roots that grow best in cool weather. I harvest mine when they are about 1.5 to 2 inches in diameter and add them, raw to salads.

An Italian vegetable that I find interesting and tasty is the super Marconi pole bean which is a Roma type bean that grows up to 10" long, is tender and sweet. Another is Tromboncino squash which can be eaten raw particularly when young and small. If left to harvest in fall, it is like a winter squash and must be cooked. Fully grown it will be 4 to 6 pounds in weight and 24 to 40" long. I have let it mature and stored it in my basement for 14 months and it was still tasty, like butternut squash.

Another interesting vegetable is an American heirloom that was almost lost - long pie pumpkin. Some different varieties include Algonquin, Indian, and Golden oblong. It is great for pies. They were grown in northeastern U.S., and because they stored so well, they would be stacked up on porches over winter. The fruit are 3-5 pounds and, when young, resemble zucchini. When ripened in storage, they turn orange, which indicates they are ready to be made into pies. If stored at 50 degrees, they will keep all winter.

Besides learning about entirely new edibles. It is also possible to learn things about familiar vegetables that you did not previously know. I have found that many folks do not realize that raw okra is tasty and a great addition to salad when sliced into thin rounds to be added just before serving. Also, many do not realize that sweet potato leaves can be eaten raw or cooked. When boiled in a bit of water they have a mild taste like spinach. They contain high dietary fiber and are a good source of a number of vitamins and minerals. So, when looking for good greens in the heat of summer, consider harvesting sweet potato leaves.

Here are some sources of unusual plants or seeds:

- Cultivariable sells yacon, Andean potatoes, potato seeds, ground nuts, oca and other unusual edibles.
- Salerno Seeds specializes in vegetables, herbs, and flowers that come from Italy.
- Uprising Seeds has some uncommon varieties including some directly from northern Italy.
- Kitazawa Seed Company is a great source of Asian vegetable seeds.
- Fedco Seeds carries an exceptionally wide variety of seeds and supplies. They sell many heirloom and hybrid vegetables and flowers. Their catalogue contains a great deal of useful gardening information.
- Victory Seed Company has a wide selection of dwarf tomato plants that were produced by members of the "Dwarf Tomato Project".

How do I ask a question?

If you have a question for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at www.netmga.net. Click the link at the top of the page, “ASK A MASTER GARDENER” to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.

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