

## **Cucumber**

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*With its high water content the cucumber is a refreshing in summer treat, hence the expression, 'cool as a cucumber'. Even novice gardeners will have success. Water well and bountiful crops are almost guaranteed.*

*Earliest cultivation of the cucumber is thought to have taken place in India. Today, numerous different types of cucumbers are grown throughout the world, having been selected by gardeners over generations to suit their particular growing conditions and culinary requirements.*

### **FACT FILE**

**Botanical Name:** *Cucumis sativis*

**Family:** *Cucurbitaceae*

**Origin:** Northern India

**Climatic Range:** *Temperatures of 21-28 degrees Celsius are ideal for cucumber cultivation. Plants are typically grown during late spring, summer and early autumn wherever conditions remain sufficiently warm and frost free. Glasshouse culture is common in cool climates. In the tropics they perform best during the dry season, but can be grown all year round providing they are afforded shade, perfect drainage and can be kept free of fungal disease.*

**Description:** *Cucumbers are annual vines that grow along the ground or climb by means of simple tendrils. The stems are angled and the rough leaves typically slightly heart-shaped. Plants bear male and female flowers. Male flowers are small and usually develop in small clusters in the axils of leaves. Female flowers are larger and more commonly borne singly. Some varieties have the ability to produce fruit parthenocarpically, that is without pollination by male flowers. Fruit is typically green, white or yellow and covered in prickles or hairs. Leaves and young shoots are also edible.*

### **Growing Your Own**

Cucumbers are quick, abundant producers. Under ideal conditions you can expect to begin harvesting in as little as six weeks after planting.

Plants are best grown from seed sown directly into the soil where they will be left to mature. In cold climates gardeners often start plants off in containers under glass, then plant out established seedlings when the weather warms up. Care should be taken when planting out as cucumbers are easily set back by root disturbance.

Bitterness will result from lack of nutrients or water stress, so prepare the soil well and water regularly. Nutrient rich compost and/or well-decomposed animal manure should be added to the soil prior to planting.

The soil should be well drained with a pH of between 6 and 7.5. Establishing three plants at any one time will provide more than enough cucumbers for a family. Each vine typically produces 8-10 fruit. Repeat sowings at six –eight week intervals for as long as climatic conditions allow.

### **Going Up**

Cucumbers make ideal trellis crops. Keeping foliage and fruit elevated above the soil surface helps to minimize leaf diseases such as powdery mildew and prevent fruit rot. It also makes effective use of vertical space in smaller gardens and is useful when growing plants in pots.

Like most vine crops, cucumbers are surface rooting and benefit from mulching. In cooler climates, cucumbers are often grown in glasshouses or provided with shelter and additional warmth by growing plants against north facing walls.



### **Trench Method**

Some gardeners prefer to erect their supporting trellis alongside a trench filled with compost and manure. Seeds are planted into the trench at 30cm intervals. Allow at least one metre between multiple rows. Upon germination plants are encouraged to grow up the trellis provided.

### **Mound Method**

An alternative to this is to create a mound from a ½ wheel barrowful or more of a compost/manure mix. Create a depression in the center to hold water. Form a teepee over the mound and plant 3-5 seeds in a circle around the base of the support structure.

### **Branching Out**

Pinching out the tips of young plants will encourage branching. Liquid seaweed and compost tea can help build disease resistance. Side dressing with organically based fertiliser enriched with potassium promotes vigorous, disease resistant growth. Regular watering is essential.

### **Fruitless Effort**

Occasionally cucumbers fail to set fruit. This may be the result of a lack of suitable insect pollinators, especially bees. Small fruits that appear to form then turn yellow and drop off have generally not been successfully pollinated. Plants have a limited ability to carry large numbers of cucumber at one time. Failure to harvest mature fruit from vines can result in a failure of new fruit to form.

High light intensity tends to encourage the production of male flowers at the expense of female blooms and hence a lack of fruit. Provision of light shade over gardens can overcome the problem.

Fruit production is enhanced under short day length. If you garden where the summer days are long and the relative hours of darkness are short, you may experience good plant growth, but few flowers and/or fruit. Selection of varieties appropriate to your climate will minimize these problems.

### **Saving Your Own Seed**

To prevent different varieties of cucumbers cross-pollinating with one another, hand pollinate unopened flowers, then cover. Fruit must be left to fully mature before harvest and seed should only be saved from fruit that is true to type with good vigor, abundant production, disease resistance and well-filled fruit. Wash the pulp from seeds and dry thoroughly before storing.

### **Varieties**

*White, pale green or yellow skinned cucumbers generally have lower acidity levels.*

Apple Crystal - First appeared in Australian catalogues around 1933. The fruit is almost pure white with a taste that is sweeter and milder than green cucumber varieties. Eden Seeds, Yates

Richmond River - Australian heirloom variety, bearing white to yellow skinned fruit. Eden Seeds

Lemon - a favourite rounded heirloom type renowned for its good growth under relatively, dry conditions. Eden Seeds, Diggers

#### Giant Russian

Best low acid variety for subtropical/tropical gardeners. Large, long keeping, yellow fruit. Green Harvest, Eden Seeds

Armenian Yard Long Cucumber (*Cucumis melo*) – Selection with distinctive long, curved fluted fruits with few seeds and a mild flavour. Eden Seeds, Diggers

*Green skinned selections with white flesh are the most common varieties available.*

Green Gem - Compact growing variety popular in humid regions due to its disease resistance. Greenpatch Organic Seeds, Eden Seeds

Mideast Prolific Lebanese – Best picked when 15-20cm long, this selection is particularly quick producing. Green Harvest

Marketmore – Popular, disease resistant variety for home gardens. Green harvest, Eden Seeds.

*Pickling cucumbers or gherkins are cucumbers that are picked while still small and used for pickling.*

Lebanese Mini – Heirloom type bearing small, crisp fruit ideal for pickling or eating fresh. Diggers, Eden Seeds

West Indian Gherkins (*Cucumis anguria*) - Leaves have 3-5 deep lobes with small round fruit borne on 10-12cm long stalks. Eden Seeds

*Eden Seeds stocks an extensive range of cucumber varieties including Chinese Snake, Early Fortune, German Pickling, Gympie Gold, Italian Non-Acid, Jefferson, Long White, Manning White, Muncher Burpless and National Pickling Gherkin.*

### **Daringly Different**

The Bitter Cucumber (*Momordica charantia*) produces pale yellow flowers, which develop into pale green then yellow blistered fruit. Used as a vegetable when young, but mature fruit can also be cooked. The leaves and shoots are well regarded as a vegetable.

The Horned Cucumber, Kiwana or Jelly Melon (*Cucumis metuliferous*) is prolific bearing. Young, green fruit can be used like conventional cucumbers. As the fruit matures it becomes orange coloured with prominent horned spines. The green, seed filled flesh develops a refreshing tangy flavour.

Tropical Cucumber, Wax Gourds, Hairy or Fuzzy Melons (*Benincasia hispida*) are the giants of the cucumber family. Popular in oriental cultures, fruit weighing 20 or 30kg are not usual. Prized for their medicinal value, they are considered to have a cooling effect on the body.

The Asian Yellow Cucumber (*Cucumis sativis*) grows 12-15cm in diameter and 25-40cm long and has a distinctive netted skin similar to a rockmelon. Made into a sweet pickle, served with fish or used to make sweet and sour sauce, the entire fruit, including the seeds and skin are also used in soup making.

*Look for seeds of these selections at outlets stocking Asian vegetables and seeds.*

### **Strange, but True**

*During Victorian times gardeners took great pride in exhibiting cucumbers, however displays featuring crooked cucumbers were deemed improper. George Stephenson may have built the first steam locomotive, but is equally famous for the invention and manufacture of cucumber glasses. Young cucumbers were inserted into the glass tubes, encouraging them to grow straight.*

*Some competitive organic growers have been known to tie a rock to the end of the developing cucumbers to ensure that they grow straight.*