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Lemon Cucumbers

By Susan Pelton

It's that time of year. The weather has been hot and the garden is producing vegetables faster than we can eat them. The squash, zucchini and cucumbers are coming in fast and furious. A batch of ratatouille has already been canned and this past weekend it was time to put up some pickles.



There are several varieties of cucumbers in our garden including the smaller pickling cukes, the long English cucumbers (it doesn't seem proper to call them 'cukes'), and a fun variety known as the lemon cucumber. Originating in the Middle-East in the 1600s this variety has been in the US since 1894; a package of the seeds were offered in the 1901 James Vick & Sons catalog for 10¢. The description was as follows: "The flesh is exceedingly tender and crisp, with a sweet flavor surpassing all other cucumbers. They have none of the bitter or acid taste so generally found in cucumbers". I confess that I was first attracted to it a few years ago and planted it as more of a novelty than anything else. I was surprised to find that it is a vigorous plant that sends out yards of growth. This is a plant that produces a lot of oval-shaped, yellow-gold fruit over the season.

As with all cucurbits that are planted in gardens across Connecticut, cucumbers fare the best when they are planted after the soil temperatures are above 60°F and all danger of frost has passed. Plant these in hills of three or singly about a foot apart and provide trellises or cages to support the vigorous vines. As the vines mature they will produce flowers that are andromonoecious, meaning that they have both male and female elements within the same blossom. This feature allows self-pollination to happen easier than on other cucurbits that are monoecious, which have separate male and female flowers on the same plant or dioecious, where the male and female flowers are on different plants altogether.

The fruit is the size, shape, and color of a large lemon with a nearly round, somewhat ovoid shape. There is often a protrusion at the blossom end similar to the 'navel' of an orange. When cut, the inside has the appearance of a lemon wedge with flesh that develops from a pale green to pale yellow to a yellow-orange at maturity. They are delicious to eat fresh from the garden having sweet tasting fruit that is thin-skinned, 'burpless', and not bitter. Many cucurbits have a compound known as cucurbitacin that gives some cucumbers, melons, pumpkins, and zucchini that bitter taste. It can be especially noticeable at the stem end where it tends to accumulate or in fruits that are stressed from a lack of water. It is the biochemical that is abundant in *Momordica charantia*, also known as bitter melon. Cucurbitacin has been bred out of many cucurbit species but cross-pollination with wild cucumbers can increase levels of the chemical in domestic crops.



I enjoy pickling them as much for their taste, which not at all tart or lemony, as for the beautiful and unique way that they look. The following text is a quick overview of the boiling water canning bath process but full details can be found at the USDA Complete Guide to Home Canning and should be followed to the letter for proper food safety.

After the cucumbers have been washed and the ends trimmed I then cut them into wedges. They are placed in a large bowl, sprinkled with coarse salt and covered with crushed ice. After 2-4 hours of refrigeration they are ready to be drained and rinsed. While the cukes are in their ice bath, prepare the pickling syrup of sugar, vinegar and pickling spices. I also add powdered turmeric to add flavor and a tint of yellow to the finished product to further the appearance of 'lemon' cucumbers. The hot cucumber wedges and the pickling syrup are ladled into sterilized glass canning jars, sealed and put into a hot water bath. Due to the high acidic content of most pickled food they do not need to be pressure canned and can be processed by being submerged in boiling water for the USDA recommended amount of time. Once cooled, the jars can be stored in a clean, cool, dark, dry place ready to be enjoyed all winter long.

For more information about growing cucurbits or other horticultural topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.