

Garden Column

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Cucumbers

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Was there ever a vegetable that has been as maligned as the cucumber? Samuel Johnson (English writer) viciously wrote, “A cucumber should be well sliced, and dressed with pepper and vinegar, and then thrown out as good for nothing.” Waverly Root (American journalist and writer) condescendingly wrote, “The cucumber is about as close to neutrality as a vegetable can get without ceasing to exist.” And Richard Bartham (English ambassador and poet) got down to the heart of the matter when he wrote, “Tis not her coldness father, that chills my laboring breast; it’s that confounded cucumber I’ve ate and can’t digest.”

The cucumber has been tolerated historically, like the town drunk at a village picnic, as a barely edible vegetable that was said, in olden English times, to make the churchyards (graveyards) prosperous. That is until the English unwittingly absolved its reputation by putting it in a sandwich to accompany their afternoon tea. Since then, the cucumber’s reputation has flourished, especially in the salad bowl.

A few of its reported health benefits border on snake oil spiels. They are low in calories, which aids weight loss; have healthy skin benefits; are a natural laxative (cleanses the body!); helps with arthritis, high blood pressure, acne, and stomach problems; promotes healthy thick hair and teeth and gums; eases nausea and vomiting; good for tired eyes; and keeps you cool during the summer.

Cucumbers are a tropical vegetable that thrive when the weather is hot and water is plentiful. Plants are very frost tender and shouldn’t be set in the garden until soil temperatures are reliably in the 70-degree range, usually 2 weeks after the last frost date.

Cucumbers grow in two forms, vining and bush. Whether you want a cucumber for slicing or pickling there’s a variety to suit any purpose from a single serving, a classic heirloom taste, or long fruits that yield many slices.

Vines scramble along the ground or clamber up trellises while bush types form a more compact plant. Vining cucumbers generally yield more fruit than bush types but the bush cucumbers are better suited to containers and small gardens. If a trellis is not available, a 12 to 18 inch diameter cage made from 4 or 5 foot welded wire fencing or hog wire will support 2 or 3 vines.

Cucumbers need a warm, fertile soil with a pH of 6.0 to 6.8 although they will tolerate soils up to 7.6 pH. Compost should be incorporated into the soil before planting bush-type seedlings, 36 to 60 inches apart, depending on the variety, and vine types 1 foot apart.

In our long and cool spring, soils can be warmed 3 to 4 degrees by covering the hill or row with black plastic. If black plastic is not used the soil can be mulched with straw, chopped leaves or an organic mulch shortly after planting. Mulch is especially important to keep the fruit clean of bush types and vines not growing on a trellis. Straw mulch has the added benefit as a detriment for slugs and partially so for cucumber beetles.

Cucumbers grow fast and don't require a lot of care. However the soil must be kept consistently moist with an inch of water per week. If possible, use a soaker hose or drip irrigation to keep the foliage dry and prevent foliar diseases. Inconsistent moisture causes oddly shaped or poor tasting fruit.

A balanced slow release fertilizer should be worked into the soil when you plant or sprinkled around plants later in the growing season. A liquid fertilizer can also be used every 2 weeks by applying it directly to soil around plant stems starting a couple of weeks after planting.

Cucumbers bear male and female flowers. Female blooms have a small swelling at the base that eventually becomes the fruit. If plants bloom but don't fruit, something is likely interfering with pollination. Make sure you have both types of blooms. Early in the plant's life male blooms usually appear first and then drop off. Within a week or two, female flowers will appear, each with a small cucumber-shaped swelling at the base. However, both female and male flowers must be blooming at the same time. This may not happen early in the plant's life so be patient.

Cucumbers have several pests. Squash bugs attack seedlings, slugs like ripening fruit, and aphids colonize leaves and buds. Straw mulch keeps slugs away and trellising vines keeps the fruit off the ground away from slugs. Insecticides will control the insects and for the organic gardener, there are "entomological soaps".

One of the most serious diseases is a bacterial wilt. Striped or spotted cucumber beetles chew holes in leaves and flowers and scar stems and fruits but most importantly they transmit the bacteria that cause wilt. The disease is controlled by controlling the beetle with insecticides. If a few plants are diseased, rogue and bury them to prevent further disease spread. Pumpkins and squash are also affected but to a lesser extent.

A common but less serious disease is powdery mildew. The disease is most prevalent in high humidity conditions caused by thick foliage and lack of air movement. This fungus-caused disease produces white patches on the leaves that reduces the plant's ability to photosynthesize, resulting in smaller and fewer fruit. A sulfur fungicide is effective if applied early and often.

Cucumbers can be picked whenever they're big enough to use. Check vines daily as the fruits enlarge quickly and the more you harvest the more fruit you'll get. Don't let cucumbers get too large or they will become bitter. The yellowing at the blossom end of a cucumber is a symptom of over ripeness. And although lemon cucumber looks like a lemon, by the time the fruit turns yellow it may be too seedy for most tastes. Cucumbers can be refrigerated for 7 to 10 days but use them as soon as possible after picking.

Eliza Acton (1799 – 1859), an English cook and poet gave this defamed vegetable some grudging respect when he said, "The cucumber, though apt to disagree with persons of delicate habit, when sauced in the common English mode with salt, pepper, and vinegar only, may often be eaten by them with impunity when dressed with plenty of oil." One wonders. Did he eat salad?