

Community Horticulture Fact Sheet #37 Growing Asian Vegetables

We are lucky in the Pacific Northwest to have many neighbors who trace their family back to Asia within the last generation or two. Many of these people have retained their traditional foods, which we can sample at local restaurants. If we want to try cooking an Asian-style dish for ourselves, our grocery stores carry all the necessary ingredients. The trouble is, if you decide you like baby pak choy and snow peas, you could go broke before you eat your fill. Like any specialty produce, Asian vegetables are pricey. Fortunately, many are easy to grow. Here are a few Asian vegetables you might try.

Yard long beans or asparagus beans:

These can be grown in our area, but we really don't get enough heat to do a very good job. (They resent our cool night temperatures.) By trial and error we have discovered that you should pick your sunniest spot, make a raised bed and plant the seed out when the soil has warmed. (Transplants go into shock). Cover the bed for the first several weeks with a clear plastic row cover and pray for a warm summer. With luck, you will get a nice crop of tasty beans -- pencil thin but about 14-18" long. (These "beans" are closely related to black-eyed peas and only distantly to regular green beans.)

Bottle gourd: This is the number one vegetable of many Lao gardeners. (Yes, it is the gourd out of which you might make a birdhouse.) The fruit should be harvested while still young and tender; it is peeled, cut into pieces and then steamed or stir-

fried. The shoots (vine ends) are also used as a green vegetable. Laotian gardeners steam them (to blanch) and then freeze them for winter eating. Like many squashes, they take time to get going, so transplants are recommended.

Thai hot pepper: These are among the hottest peppers we can grow here. They need to be started indoors in about February and then transplanted out in early June. Clear plastic covers to build heat are important to get them growing.

Asian eggplant: These are long, skinny or small, egg-shaped versions of the familiar vegetable. They are heat-lovers too and good companions for peppers under a plastic row cover. They can be added to stir-fries without peeling or seeding and cook up very fast.

Cucumbers: My favorite cukes are Oriental-types. They are long, slender and have small seeds. If they are kept mulched and well watered, they never get bitter. Trellising will help you produce nice, straight fruit.

Snow or Chinese peas: These are the flat pods, not the newer snap peas. They grow easily and are amazingly productive. 'Oregon Sugar Pod II' is an excellent, virus-resistant variety for our area.

Chinese parsley (cilantro): This herb can be sown spring through fall. Late-seeded crops will over-winter and produce an exceptionally early crop next year.

Chinese chives: This perennial is another that can be sown just about anytime. The flat leaves and the flowers are both used for a mild, slightly garlicky flavor in many dishes. They are easy to grow and very ornamental.

Amaranth: This leafy vegetable was cultivated by ancient American peoples as well as people on other continents. With such a long history, it's no wonder that there are many kinds. The names tampala and Chinese spinach are also used for leaf amaranth. There are also grain amaranths (produce edible seed), ornamental amaranths (such as 'Joseph's Coat') and weed amaranths (such as pigweed); all of these are edible through not as tasty. Very young leaves and stems can be used in salad. Older plants are slightly stronger-flavored and not as tender and are used like spinach or in soups.

Malabar or climbing spinach or basella: This green leafy vegetable is very popular in many Asian countries, but requires more summer heat than we get in Seattle. We do well with so many other greens that it would seem a waste to devote your hottest spot to this crop. It is a versatile vegetable with a mucilaginous quality similar to okra.

Garland chrysanthemum or chop suey greens: This yellow daisy is tasty, nutritious, easy-to-grow and very pretty, if allowed to flower. Tender, young leaves are used in a wide variety of ways -- usually steamed or stir-fried or raw in salads. As the plants get older the flavor gets stronger and more bitter. At this point, the flower petals can be eaten.

Pak choy (also spelled "bok" and "choi"): This non-heading, mild mustard can have smooth or crinkled leaves on broad, white or green stems. The most common kind looks a little like Swiss chard. It can be planted by seeds or transplants. We can get two crops of pak choy per year. Plant the early crop in March and the late one in August.

Yiu choy: Again this is a perfect crop for our Northwest climate, since it is difficult to grow in hot weather. They are ready for harvest when the flower stalk is present, but still green (no yellow flowers open). Use stems, leaves and flowers -- all are sweet and delicious.

Chinese or napa cabbage: These are head-forming, succulent, mild cabbage vegetables. 'Spring A-1' is the variety we recommend for spring planting and 'China King' is good for fall (sow mid-July to mid-August). 'Michilli', and 'Wong Bok' don't seem to work as well here. Generally, fall crops are the most successful.

Chinese mustard greens or gai choy: This is a must-have crop for most Asian gardeners. They love the fact that it can be grown all year round. Our summers seldom get too hot or our winters too cold for mustard greens. It is a fast crop and one of the most nutritious you can grow. It has a stronger taste than the greens named above.

Chinese broccoli or kailan: This is another plant-it-early-or-plant-it-late crop. Here, however, we recommend you do it as a spring crop. Early plantings develop a big, healthy root system that allows you to harvest the plant repeatedly through the summer. At each cutting you take the broccoli-like stalks and adjoining leaves. Let it regrow and keep picking until the plant's energy runs out.

Radishes: We've all tried the little, round, red ones but the Asian cultivars come in a variety of shapes and colors. Many, including daikon, are meant to be planted in August for fall and winter eating. All parts of the radishes are edible (including the pointy seedpods) and may be eaten raw, cooked or pickled.