

Go Crazy with Cucurbits

If you've been a vegetable gardener for very long, you've successfully grown cucumbers, pumpkins, and the ubiquitous zucchini. Have you stopped planting these nutritious and easy-to-grow members of the cucurbit family because it became a little monotonous? There are fun alternatives – just as easy to grow, very tasty, but with a little different look.

There are many reliable alternatives for the standard 'Straight Eight' cucumber. Try an Asian variety such as 'Tasty Jade' or 'Suyo Long'. If trellised, these cucumbers grow straight and narrow. Bitterness is unheard of, the seed cavity is very small, and the cucumbers are crisp and sweet. 'Lemon' cucumbers are round, lemon-yellow, and taste great when layered with tomato slices. If you really want to be unusual, grow a 'Striped Armenian', or a white cucumber such as 'Miniature White' or 'White Wonder'.



Cucumbers front to back: Straight Eight, Taurus, Tasty Jade, Lemon, Suyo Long, Striped Armenian



Pumpkins clockwise from upper left: Kakai, Long Island Cheese, Long Pie, Small New England Pie

Do you think pumpkins are always round and orange? 'Long Island Cheese' is buff-colored and grows in the shape of a large wheel of cheese. However, the flesh is deep orange, stores for many months without getting stringy, and makes the creamiest pumpkin pie. The vines are prolific and each pumpkin provides enough flesh for several pies. Another one of our favorites is 'Kakai'. Although the flesh is not very tasty, this pumpkin is worth growing just for the seeds. After harvesting, display this colorful yellow and green-striped pumpkin around your home. Then scoop out the large dark-green hullless seeds. When roasted, they are delicious. Eat them alone for a snack or add to muffins, trail mixes, or hot cereals. Each 'Kakai' vine produces many pumpkins.

An 'Acorn' or 'Butternut' winter squash is good, but how about trying something a little more bold? 'Sibley', a large gray-blue hubbard-type squash, has sweet-flavored flesh that becomes richer when stored for a few months. One 'Sibley' squash will make a pot of soup to feed an entire family. 'Ambercup' is a small deep-orange squash which is delicious when baked. For something a little more ordinary, grow 'Delicata'. The light-orange flesh is tasty enough to eat plain right out of the oven or microwave. If you have trouble getting your kids to eat vegetables,

grow spaghetti squash. The flesh is noodle-like when raked out with a fork after baking. Put a sauce over these “noodles” and you may be surprised how well it is received by even the pickiest child.

One has to look a little harder to get creative with summer squash. ‘Papaya Pear’ was introduced in 2003. Several of us grew this variety last year in our own gardens with great success. The deep yellow fruits are papaya-shaped and although best when harvested about 3 inches wide, still remained quite good when almost twice as large. The plants kept producing well into fall until most of us ended up yanking them out of the ground because the freezer was full, the food bank was locking the door when they saw us coming, and we just couldn’t eat any more. ‘Flying Saucer’ is a highly ribbed bicolored patty pan, giving them an alien spaceship look. ‘Tromboncino’ is an Italian summer squash which grows up to 3 feet long. This variety should be trellised for straight fruits.

As with normal cucurbits, all the varieties mentioned here are best planted in the garden when the soil has warmed to about 70° F. Seeds can be started indoors, but they should be transplanted to the garden before they become root-bound. Start them in peat pots or transplant with care so as not to disturb the roots. In most cases, cucurbit seeds germinate easily directly in the garden, so starting them indoors is not necessary. However, hullless varieties, such as ‘Kakai’, have a tendency to rot in the ground unless the planting soil is warm and relatively dry until the seeds germinate. Avoid overhead watering on all cucurbits to reduce powdery mildew and other fungal diseases.



Papaya Pear summer squash (small & large)

In order to prove to you that we practice what we preach, here is a partial list of the new cucurbit varieties we will be trying in our individual gardens this year: ‘Mexican Sour’ gherkin, ‘Fin de Meaux’ gherkin, ‘Vert Petit de Paris’ gherkin, ‘White Sun Korean’ cucumber, ‘Southern Delight’ Japanese cucumber, ‘Iran’ winter squash, and ‘Starship’ summer squash. If we can do it, you can too!

Seed Sources

[Johnny's Selected Seeds](#)

[Le Jardin du Gourmet](#)

[Seed Savers Exchange](#)

[Territorial Seed Company](#)