

CURIOUS, EASY-TO-GROW VEGGIES

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As the popularity in backyard veggie gardening continues to grow, each year more and more people take a stab at growing their own food. After a few efforts we find that there are at least a few crops that we seem to have consistent success with each year. Perhaps for you it's green beans, lettuce, carrots, or zucchini.

I often suggest easy-to-grow crops and varieties that give people confidence in their gardening endeavors - confidence and accurate information being so crucial to gardening success.

I also encourage gardeners to try a least one, new veggie crop every year. Here are some suggestions a few unusual, lesser common, but easy-to-grow veggies. Maybe you've heard of some of these, but perhaps one or more are new to you. They are all easy to find locally as started plants or in seed packages. Hopefully you'll want to try one or more of these curious, easy-to-grow *and* easy-to-find backyard veggie crops.

To start, I think **Cape Gooseberries** (*Physalis peruviana*) are one of the easy-to-grow, backyard veggie crops of the future. Ground cherries are in the tomato family and have many names like husk tomato or bladder tomato. They are closely related to tomatillos and the ornamental perennial, Chinese Lanterns (*Physalis alkagenii*).

Ground cherries look like a much smaller version of a tomatillo with that characteristic "paper husk". The fruit inside, however, is much smaller, about the size of a marble, brownish tan and has a very unique flavor which reminds me of buttered popcorn!

Plants require sun and regular water but only grow to 1-2 ft. tall, but spread out a *lot*; most garden spaces have room for one or two of these little treasures. Harvested fruits seem to store well and retain their flavor for a long time. Find seeds or starts of these this year for sure.

Sun Chokes or **Jerusalem Artichokes** (*Helianthus tuberosus*) are gaining a resurgence in popularity these days. They're not artichokes are they not from Jerusalem. This Northeastern North American native is actually a spreading, *perennial*, sunflower with an edible tuberous root. Once quite popular, sun chokes were also named the poor man's vegetable.

Sun chokes are difficult to find as seeds, but one often purchases the tubers in fall or winter for planting as soon as you buy them. They're very easy to grow, reaching 3 to sometimes 8 feet tall and are topped with 2-4" sunflower-like flowers in summer. Give them lots of sun and be ready to water for good tuber

formation.

I see two common varieties: those with tan colored skins, and those with reddish-brown colored skins. There appears to be no difference between the two in growth habit or taste, but I've found the red ones to be easier to slice. They have a good, nutty flavor and can be chopped and eaten raw or used like a water chestnut substitute in a stir fry. I've thinly sliced them, soaked them in lime, kelp and thyme, and dehydrated them to make sun choke chips - yum!

Because of their spreading, invasive growth habit, sun chokes are definitely not for the for the mixed perennial border. Plant in patches surrounded with bamboo barrier to stop their spreading habit. as one would with bamboo. Planting in containers is another option, and with that I have two suggestions: (1) use a *big* (huge!) pot, to accommodate the tuber growth for the year, and (2) be ready to water; they'll use a lot of water when grown in containers.

Chioggia Beets are perhaps the most colorful root crops one can grow. They are grown just like regular beets and look just like regular beets on the outside. However, Chioggia beets, when cut in cross section, reveal colorful, candy cane colored, red and white concentric circles. Impress your friends with this colorful addition to your meals.

Mache or **Corn Salad** or **Lamb's Lettuce** (*Valerianella locusta*) is one of my absolute favorite salad greens. You won't find it in stores, but sometimes in farmers markets, because it doesn't keep or store for long. Mache is an extremely cold and frost hardy annual. The leaves have a very mild flavor and very soft, melt-in-your-mouth texture reminiscent of butter crunch lettuce.

The plant is snow and frost tolerant, and I like to use it in the winter salad garden. I let plants reseed during the year or plant from seed in the early fall. Plants grow slowly and basically just sit there over the winter. When temps warm in late winter and early spring, plants will really begin to grow. The whole plant grows to about 8-10" tall and wide. The entire plant can be eaten, but has the best flavor and softest texture if harvested before the plant flowers.

Lemon Cucumbers look like lemons but taste like cucumbers. Lemon cukes are becoming more popular, and I see them more and more in farmers markets. Because the fruit size is smaller than all other cukes, they ripen more quickly, and hold well when grown on trellises.

The fruits are ready to harvest when they are between the size of a racquet ball and a tennis ball and have a light, bright yellow color. Darker tan markings usually indicate you've waited too long to pick them, and they'll be real seedy with a more bitter, less fresh taste. These are so easy to grow and so unique looking, you have to try them this year.

Along the lines of the lemon cucumber is the **8 Ball Zucchini**. Yes, when ready to pick, this zucchini looks like an 8 ball. Use your imagination a little, because they're not actually black, but super dark green, and unfortunately, there is no "8" on the side.

Like lemon cukes, you'll get a quicker harvest with 8 Ball Zucchini because the fruit is smaller than standard zucchinis. Harvest when they're about the size of a tennis ball. They will reach the size of a large grapefruit if left unpicked, but the skin gets much harder, flavor decreases with much more seediness. Again, they are very easy to grow, and like with all zucchini, one plant is usually plenty.

Sweet Banana Peppers are my absolute favorite sweet pepper. Long and skinny, banana peppers are actually shaped like bananas. They ripen to a bright yellow color and will occasionally show tints of red if you start early and/or get some good heat in your Pacific Northwest garden space.

I like banana peppers for many reasons. They're real sweet and have a much thinner wall; because they're a smaller fruit, they tend to mature and ripen more quickly than sweet bell peppers. In a hot sunny space, you'll get lots of peppers on each plant.

So there are a few lesser common, unusual, but easy to grow veggies for your backyard garden.