

CUCUMBER



Types of Cucumber

The size, shape, color and flavor of cucumber fruits differ by variety, but all grow best under warm conditions. Growing more than one type each year is the best way to extend your cucumber season and ensure more diverse uses in the kitchen.

American slicing cucumbers are the oblong, dark green cukes you see in su-permarkets. Varieties of this type have been bred for uniformity, productivity and strong disease resistance.

Pickling cucumbers bear smaller fruits with bumpy, slightly wrinkled rinds that make them naturally crisp and firm. Some varieties resist bacterial wilt, a widespread cucumber disease (described later).

Asian cucumbers are long and slender, with small seed cavities. Non-bitter Asian cucumbers are easy to digest, and are also not preferred by cucumber beetles.

Greenhouse cucumbers produce self-fertile female flowers, so you can grow many varieties of this slightly shade-tolerant type under row covers or in high tunnels.

Other Cucumis species include ‘Armenian’ and ‘Indian Poona Kheera’ cucumbers (both *C. melo*), ‘West Indian’ gherkin (*C. anguria*) and jelly melon (*C. metuliferus*, also called African horned melon).

When to Plant Cucumbers

★ Sow seeds directly into prepared rows or hills one to two weeks after your last spring frost, and make a second planting a month later. Where summers are short and cool, start seeds indoors under bright fluorescent lights two weeks before your last spring frost.

★ If kept moist and warm (above 70 degrees Fahrenheit), cucumber seeds should sprout within five days. Set out 3- to 4-week-old seedlings after your last frost has passed.

Saving Cucumber Seeds

★ To save seeds from open-pollinated varieties, allow perfect fruits to ripen on the vine until they develop leathery yellow or brown rinds. Slice away the rinds without cutting into the seeds, place the cores in a pail of water, and mash with your hands.

★ After two days, remove the seeds that have accumulated at the bottom of the pail and spread them out to dry on newspaper or paper plates (discard any floating seeds). Allow seeds to dry at room temperature for two weeks before storing your largest, plumpest ones in a cool, dry place. Cucumber seeds should stay viable for at least five years.

Preventing Cucumber Pests and Diseases

★ Grow cucumbers under row cover tunnels for pest protection. After plants begin blooming heavily, remove the covers so insects can pollinate the flowers.

★ You can control cucumber beetles using yellow sticky traps, but the traps may also snare small beneficial insects and pollinators. In large plantings, perimeter trap crops of 'Blue Hubbard' winter squash can be an effective cucumber beetle control strategy. Because the beetles prefer the squash plants, you'll intercept the pests before they can wreak havoc on your future pickle supply. Nearby plantings of borage may also help suppress cucumber beetle populations: I suspect they are intimidated by the large bumblebees and other insects that hang out in the borage.

★ Bacterial wilt is a common disease spread by cucumber beetles. Initially, a single stem wilts, followed by another, and within a week infected plants are barely alive. The best defense is to grow resistant varieties, such as ‘County Fair’ or ‘Little Leaf,’ or to protect plants with row covers.

★ Powdery mildew often infects old cu-cumber plants, turning leaves dull gray and halting plant growth. Many varie-ties offer some genetic resistance, such as ‘Little Leaf’ and ‘Marketmore 76.’ Pull up and compost badly infected plants.