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Cucumbers

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Recommended Citation
Hinkamp, Dennis, "Cucumbers" (1998). *All Archived Publications.* Paper 796.
http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/extension_histall/796

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GARDEN NOTES

CUCUMBERS

By Jerry L. Goodspeed,
USU Extension Horticulturist

September 1998 Summer-01

Cucumbers are very versatile vegetables. They are used in salads, eaten fresh, pickled, used in sandwiches and, if left on the vine long enough, can be used as a dugout canoe. One of the more popular vegetables grown, they thrive in our arid, warm summers.

Pickling and slicing are the two basic types of cucumbers grown in the garden. The slicing type are generally larger and best for eating fresh. Occasionally they are listed as having black or white spines. These are easy to rub off the fruit and have no impact on the taste. Most slicing cucumbers mature when they reach about 8 inches long, and before they turn yellow.

Pickling cucumbers are smaller and used for canning purposes. Lighter green in color, they have a warty surface and a blockier shape. They can also be eaten fresh, but get hard and bitter if they become too large. Do not plant a pickling type cucumber and try to use it as a slicer.

Cucumbers are monoecious plants, meaning they have both male and female flowers on the same plant. The male flowers usually bloom first in early summer while the female flowers wait until warmer weather later in the summer. I suppose the male is sent first to check things out and make sure all is safe.

Since the first few flowers are male, they do not produce fruit. I receive many calls every year from worried gardeners who see blossoms but have no fruit. Do not panic—be patient. Eventually the female flowers will emerge and set a small fruit next to the vine.

Cucumbers are a warm season plant requiring full sun. Like most vegetables, they thrive in well drained deep soil with periodic drying periods between watering. Apply an all purpose fertilizer in the spring and an extra dose of nitrogen fertilizer once the plant starts to bear fruit.

Cucumbers left to sprawl along the ground can take over half the garden. Vining types need a good 4 to 6 feet for each plant while bush varieties only require 2 to 3 feet. If space is a problem, cucumbers climb well up trellises or fences. When the plants are trellised the fruit is easier to see and stays off the ground.

Cucumbers do not like much competition, so keep the plants as weed free as possible. Good organic or synthetic mulches help keep weeds to a minimum. Pine needles or leaves work well for this and can be tilled into the garden in the fall to enhance the soil.

Cucumbers are relatively problem-free with only occasional cases of powdery mildew. Keep the leaves dry and rotate the placement of plants from year to year. Slugs and snails like to munch the leaves and the fruit, but proper watering and removing debris and likely habitat places will reduce their numbers.

The exact reason for an occasional bitter cucumber is not known. It is associated with fluctuations in water and heat stress. The bitter flavor is found right under the skin and can be minimized by peeling the cucumber.

Keep cucumbers picked as they ripen. This stimulates new fruit production and encourages vigorous growth. When the fruit is allowed to get the size of a cruise liner, it is tough, old and the plant decreases fruit production. The best time to harvest is during the cool morning or late evening hours.

For more information, contact your local **USU County Extension office.**

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