

# SOMETHING DIFFERENT IN THE VEGETABLE GARDEN

By Ralph E. Mitchell, Director/Horticulture Agent - UF/IFAS Extension Service, Charlotte County

Our long and hot growing season offers vegetable gardeners in Southwest Florida unique opportunities to grow different and interesting crops that are not often seen in typical gardens. Would you like to try to grow some Malabar Spinach, Calabaza, or Roselle? Perhaps some Chayote or Bitter Melons? While these unique vegetables are more often grown in tropical regions of the world, they will do fine right in your backyard garden. Nowadays, some of these vegetables are commonly seen in grocery stores. Many of these plants produce items that are readily acceptable by all tastes, while some are more of an acquired taste. The following article gives a brief highlight of each of these uncommon vegetables.

I have grown and eaten Malabar Spinach before. It is not really spinach, but produces edible leaves that reminds you of the more familiar green. Grown from seeds or cuttings, this vine does best in warm, rainy weather and can be trained up a trellis. Malabar spinach is available in both a green and red variety and can be considered ornamental as well as edible. The leaves are very fleshy and are actually a bit gelatinous. The leaves are often prepared with chopped onions and hot chilies.

The Calabaza is simply a tropical pumpkin often called the West Indian pumpkin. Used more like a

winter squash, this pumpkin does grow really well in our climate. There is a lot of variation from cultivar to cultivar, but most tend to be mottled green or yellow to buff-cream in color and grow up to 12 pounds in size. Most are rounded, but some may have long necks. Two good Florida varieties are 'La Primera' and 'La Segunda'. The meaty flesh is yellowish to orange in color and is sweet. Calabaza likes a good deal of organic matter in the soil and should be planted in rows nine feet apart with plants set at four feet intervals in rows due to their long and extensive vines. This tropical pumpkin stores well for several weeks. It is truly delicious!

Roselle is not really a vegetable, but is grown primarily for its fleshy flower part called a calyx. Juice and jelly with a distinctive cranberry-like flavor are made from this dark red part. Also called red sorrel and even the Florida cranberry, Roselle is an interesting plant in the Hibiscus family. Up to seven feet tall, this okra-like annual plant can be started from seeds or cuttings in April or August. The flower parts are ready to harvest in about four months. The calyx "fruits" are harvested when they are tender and plump. 'Victor' is a noted variety good for Florida. Roselle makes a great festive beverage for the Holidays.

Chayote is a squash-like vegetable that is commonly seen in almost all grocery stores these



*Malabar spinach*

days. Originally from Guatemala, this vegetable is also called vegetable pear and mango squash. The fruit is pear-shaped, light green in color with one flat seed in the middle. Chayote may be grooved and prickly, but most Florida grown varieties are smooth skinned. This is a perennial vegetable and may take two to three years to become fully established for best production. Frost protection may be needed during the winter months. Some selected varieties that can be grown in Florida include 'Florida Green' and 'Monticello White'. As this plant is a vine, some type of support such as trellis will be needed. To grow Chayote, plant the whole fruit on its side with the stem end exposed just above the soil. Plant one Chayote every 12 feet. Use Chayote just as you would squash - the texture reminds me of Scallop or Pat-typan squash.

One final exotic vegetable you may want to try is the Bitter Melon. As its name implies, it is very bitter! Also called the Chinese Cucumber, Balsam

Pear or Balsam Apple, Bitter Melons are used as a boiled vegetable or in soups. Look at a Bitter Melon and you will see an odd fruit that is six to eight inches long and cucumber-shaped with bumpy, warty yellow-green to greenish skin. Started from seed, it will take about four months until fruit can be harvested. As with Chayote, make sure to allow for plenty of growing room for this 10-foot vine in the form of a trellis.

Where do you find a source for these plants? As mentioned earlier, many grocery stores, both big and small have these vegetables for sale and seeds can be harvested from this raw material. Many local specialty stores will have all of these exotic vegetables in stock in season. Secondly, try an Internet search to find mail order catalogs that sell seeds of selected varieties. Once you have these vegetables growing, you can also save the seeds for your replanting needs.

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*Resource:*

*Stephens, J.M. (2003) Spinach, Malabar -- Basella rubra L. UF/IFAS Extension Service.*

*Stephens, J.M. (2003) Calabaza -- Cucurbita moschata Duch. Ex Lam. UF/IFAS Extension Service.*

*Stephens, J.M. (2003) Roselle -- Hibiscus sabdariffa L. UF/IFAS Extension Service.*

*Stephens, J.M. (2003) Chayote -- Sechium edule (Jacq) Sw. UF/IFAS Extension Service.*

*Stephens, J.M. (2003) Momordica -- Momordica spp. UF/IFAS Extension Service.*

For more information on all types of vegetables to grow in our area, please contact our Master Gardeners on the Plant Lifeline at 941.764.4340 from 1:00pm-4:00pm Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Our office is located at 25550 Harbor View Road, Suite 3, in Port Charlotte. Our Plant Clinics are available across the county:

- **Demonstration Garden** (6900 Florida Street, PG) Thursdays 9:00am-11:00am.
- **Englewood/Charlotte Public Library** Thursdays 10:00am-1:00pm.
- **Mid-County Regional Library** 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Thursday of month 1:00pm-3:00pm.
- **Edison College Learning Resources Library** 3<sup>rd</sup> Tuesday of month 1:00pm-4:00pm.

Ralph Mitchell ([Ralph.Mitchell@charlottefl.com](mailto:Ralph.Mitchell@charlottefl.com)) is the County Extension Director/Horticulture Agent for Charlotte County Extension Service. Contact a volunteer Master Gardener from 1:00pm-4:00pm Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 941.764.4340 or by email ([Master.Gardener@charlottefl.com](mailto:Master.Gardener@charlottefl.com)).

For more information about our Florida Yards and Neighborhoods Program, please contact our FYN Horticulture Program Assistant, Allison Steele, at 941.764.4351. Allison can help educate you about the Florida Yards & Neighborhoods Program so that you can create a beautiful, Florida-Friendly landscape that saves you time and money while conserving precious water resources and reducing pollution.