

My Chickpea Adventures

by Nancy Van Neste-Baker

Now, I've always loved chickpeas . . . been extremely partial to humus, chickpeas in salads, chickpea soup, East Indian chickpea dishes, even vegan chickpea croutons . . . anything with chickpeas would tantalize my taste buds!! So, it was with bated breath that, when I listened to Dan Jason speak about pulses at the April Nanoose Garden Club's meeting, my mind instantly ran with the idea of growing my own chickpeas. I very quickly went to purchase my little envelope of chickpea seeds, already in love with the idea of having this little gem in my garden come the end of the summer.

I have to give you a bit of background about my limited, but growing, gardening skills. I lived in Deep Cove, North Vancouver for my formative adult years (29 of them) and despite many failed gardening attempts, always loved the idea of growing food. Hence why in our retirement years I wanted to have an acreage and to have the ability to perhaps develop skills to become more self sufficient; food, aka, veggie/fruit garden, being the prime motivator! One of my hard-learned lessons from living at the base of Mount Seymour in a rain forest with loads of slugs, is that I assume nothing will grow (that I want to grow anyway, other than mushrooms and moss . . . and I've never wanted those!!). Therefore I do have a propensity to over-seed!! When we found our little corner of paradise in Nanoose Bay, I looked at the existing garden with the broken-down fence and dreamed of a little green flourishing haven in the not-too-distant future. My darling hubby spent the first year building a nice fence that would keep the deer and rabbits away from my efforts. (By the way, I think it's a beautiful fence!) Next came the renovation of existing raised beds with the addition of a few more, wood chips laid between the beds to decrease the amount of weeds that love to grow and with the discovery of rich manure from the stable behind us, I thought I was set for my first frank attempt at building a successful garden. Side note: Something I've discovered about myself is that I generally tend to be a plant-something-see-if-it-grows-and-then-do-research kind of person (commonly known as trial & error learning – generally not the most efficient way to do things)!

A few of my learnings early this year were:

- definitely don't plant too early . . . Nature makes up her own mind when things grow!!!
- birds don't necessarily like where you've planted seeds
- birds like to have first pick at any little green nubbin that pokes through the soil
- it's good to have a very detailed plan/drawing of your garden when you plant seeds because a) my memory is obviously not that good and b) all green nubbins look the same in the spring!
- reality is, you still have to share a portion of anything you plant with insects

All this made me realize that in the end, growing food is definitely not easy!

So back to chickpeas . . . I can't tell you how excited I was to realize that some of the green bits poking through the soil were indeed my budding chickpea plants. I tended my garden beds tenderly every morning. The earlier the sun rose, the earlier I got up, providing tilling and water as well as ensuring that no weed had a chance to grow anywhere close to my chickpea buds and plants. I waited patiently through the summer months, relishing the idea of savouring fresh green chickpeas (motivated by Dan's

scrumptious flavour descriptions). I tested the pods occasionally, remarking on the various shades of green to light yellow leaves and pods that decorated the plant stems. I learned that some pods have one or two chickpeas in them. I enjoyed the patterning of leaves and pods on the stem. I provided supports when the plants started to lean with the weight of the gems. I couldn't believe I had been able to grow these from seed!!

Fast forward to the end of the busy summer (building an outdoor kitchen, continuous visitors from June to August, married our son in our backyard mid August), we went away for a week with family and I totally missed the opportunity to enjoy the fresh green chickpeas. Upon my return, after a rather brutally hot week, the pods had begun to dry and the leaves yellowed and fell into fluffy piles at the base of the plants. I resigned myself to the fact that at least I would have some dried chickpeas.

I finally decided that perhaps it was time to take the plants out of the soil to harvest my little gems. I should probably have researched this before doing it, but I needed the "real estate" for some other plants to grow and to also plant some winter seedlings. I looked at my barrow full of plants and set about removing said pods from stems; about 1.5 hours. I was determined in the evening to finish the task at hand, so I sat, with my bowl overflowing with pods, to shell them while my husband and I watched a movie. At the end of the first movie, I was half way through my bowl, so I decided to watch a second movie. At the end of that one, I thought I might as well finish the task before going to bed, so a quarter of the way through "The Intern", I shelled my last chickpea, declared that task done and decided to tackle the next phase in the morning. In the morning, with clearer eyes, I realized several things.....

- a) I have to do something with these chickpeas, but did you know that each chickpea has a colour of it's own? Various stages from dried to not dried? Did you know that a dried chickpea has a different resonance on a plate than a non-dried chickpea?
- b) I have to do something to make sure all the peas are dried, so enter dehydrator stage left!!!
- c) harvesting chickpeas is no easy feat and extremely labour intensive, so definitely not using these little babes to make humus!!
- d) I can definitely say that I've handled each chickpea individually!!

So after all this, knowing more than I did at the beginning, and a few laughs, I can say in conclusion that growing chickpeas has been an extremely interesting and enriching experience. I certainly have a new found respect for chickpeas on my plate and I will definitely savour each and every single one of those tender (when I figure out the best way to make them edible again) little morsels that graced my garden this summer.

By the way, I still have a few of my original chickpea seeds left in my purchased envelope. I will ponder this experience, share it, journal it, and then I'll wait for the garden fever to hit me again next year and we'll see if chickpeas will rise once again!!!

