

# Anyone Growing Cucumbers?

By Al Chomica Dec 2021

Growing up as a kid I was lucky enough to have a mom who made the best crunchy, garlicky Dill Pickles around. One of her secrets for the incredible crunch was to 'ice' her cucumbers overnight in a mild brine solution. Her other secret was to use alkaline water from a spring that trickled out of the ground. I have been making her recipe for quite a few years now but ran into some supply issues a few years back when the cucumbers were planted during a warm spell in May. Unfortunately, a cold and wet "Juneuary" came along and killed them all. Knowing that this can happen, this year I planted doubles of everything and sure enough all my cucurbits in the ground died in June but I had enough to replant when it warmed up again. Then, two years ago, our seedling tray with all our melon and cucumber seed accidentally flipped over and got mixed up in a messy pile on the ground. And as you might suspect, that was just when Covid lockdowns started up and all the vegetable seeds in the stores got scooped up before I was brave enough to venture off the property. I did plant up some random seeds that sprouted from that mess, but only a few cucumbers grew instead of a big patch that is required to make a decent batch of dill pickles. It was inevitable that I discovered lacto-fermenting as a method of processing, because this method allows one to use a small number of cucumbers in single jars as opposed to a big 10-lb batch that is normally made for vinegar pickles. No vinegar is used in lacto-fermentation, it is just a brine and spices and is a much tastier product.

I ended up buying 10 lbs of hothouse cucumbers from a Farmer's Market but didn't realize at the time that these were smooth-skinned Persian slicers that are not used for dill pickles because they don't provide a crunchy skin and go soft when pickled with vinegar.

One of our goals in the garden is to save all our own seed from everything we grow. The problem with cucumbers is that most are F1 Hybrids that do not grow true to type if the seed is saved. But not all are F1 Hybrids so I searched far and wide to come up with several new varieties that are now in our annual line-up. At this time, we have saved seeds for all the different varieties that we need to grow and 2021 was a banner year for all our cucurbits.

You may ask, "What we do with different types of cucumbers?" We prepare a wide variety of end products that are all good. We started off by making my mom's famous Dill Pickle recipe but somehow, we have shifted away from vinegar-based pickles over the last year. We made Pickles in a Bucket that keep forever in the fridge without being processed. We made Mustard Pickles, Bread n' Butter Pickles, a Sweet Relish for hot dogs, a mustard-based Manitoba Relish, and Danish Asier pickles. We made several sour cream onion n' vinegar dishes and we grow a slicer for adding to fresh daily salads. Some were brined and then dehydrated to make chips that were really tasty and we even turned some of those chips into a sharp cucumber salt in the blender. But the hands down winner is to lacto-ferment them. It took several tries to perfect this recipe and I can even share it. As a cucumber processor I can safely say this recipe produces the best tasting and crunchiest cucumbers that one could ever find anywhere.

So, what are all these different varieties you ask? Here is a list that I will explain in detail below. We grew Beit Alpha, Chicago Pickling, Homemade Pickles, Langeland's Giant, White Wonder, Brown Russian, Russian Pickling, an English Telegraph type that is open pollinated and Mexican Sour Gherkins. This is what they all look like.



The **Beit Alpha** is simply a smooth-skinned cucumber like the kind that we can buy from the grocer. It is a Persian slicing cucumber that for the most part, are all F1 hybrids that cannot be grown true from seed. This particular variety is OP, or open pollinated, and grows true from seed. It was difficult to find an OP variety. The seed originated in Israel and was quite expensive.

Although these are great fresh in salads, they are also used to make Pickles in a Bucket and a sour cream/vinegar dish along with sweet onions.

They do not pickle well and go soft when canned. Plants are prolific and the fruit grows fast.

The **Chicago Pickling** variety has nice, small fruit but in our garden, it grew

poorly compared to all the other varieties.

The female flowers were few and far between and I believe we only got two or three cucumbers per plant.

By mid-summer the plants started to go yellow and stopped producing any more flowers. This feature may be good for some as all the cucumbers will ripen around the same time providing a big crop to prepare for canning.

We will not be growing this variety again.



**Homemade Pickles** was an interesting variety to grow. The fruits are small and perfect for canning. They get really fat and lose all their bumps in a short period of time, like the one on the right.

There was nothing special about them except that they produced for a long period of time over the entire summer.



The **Langeland's Giant** came to Canada from Denmark in 1942. One of our garden club members, Dagny Nielson, got the seed from her grandmother making this a true family heirloom. This cucumber is quite unique from any



others. The dense flesh is pure white and very crunchy.

The seed core is tiny and each plant will produce about 25 lbs of fruit in four or five cucumbers. These are not overgrown cucumbers that have gone to seed. Rather, they are a true giant in the world of plants and seed is not readily available. The largest we have grown was over six lbs, but the Guinness world record holder was over three feet long! They are used to make an addictive Danish pickle called, 'Asier'.



Ahh, the **White Wonder**. If I could only grow one cucumber, this would be the one. It had the weirdest skin, and unbelievably grew in clusters of four or five fruits per node. It produced early in the season and didn't stop until late in the fall. The white flesh was firm and crisp and was the



absolute sweetest of them all. When lacto-fermented they

looked beautiful in the jar and although we give away many cucumbers to friends and neighbours, we liked these so much we pretty much held on to all of them for ourselves.



And then there was the **Brown Russian**. Such a strange plant. The fruit was very prolific all summer long and it just kept flowering and flowering. We grew it up strings where it did very well. The flesh is also firm and sweet and comes in second right after the White Wonder. The fruit comes out white with black spines that rub off easily. And true to

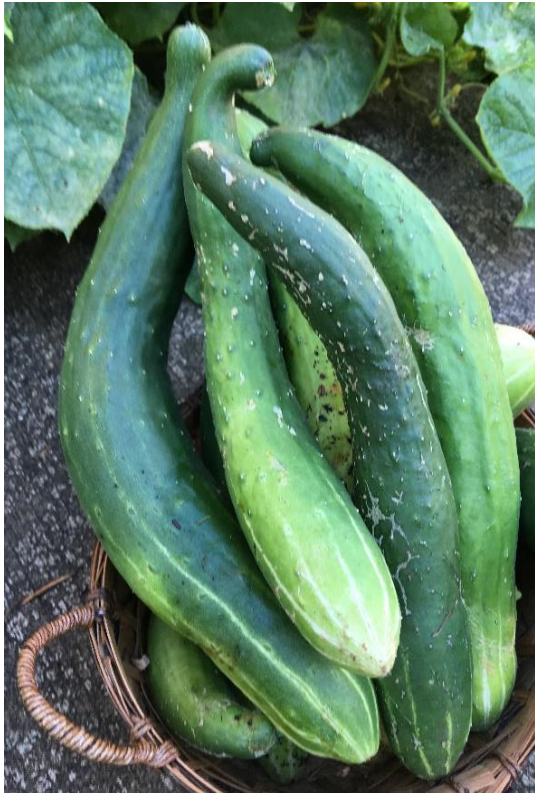
its namesake, when it forms seeds the fruit turns brown.



I would have to say the most impressive variety we grew though was the **Russian Pickling**. It had different warts without prickles and although the fruit itself was not the

sweetest or most colourful, it was the one plant we grew that was 10 times the size of any others. It took over the entire cucumber patch and produced faithfully until late in the fall. All our Russian varieties did well.





It is difficult to find OP seeds for English Telegraph-type cucumbers. A contractor gave us some seeds for a variety he called the '**Climbing Cucumber**' and indeed it was. We grew these up strings as well and they were also very prolific. During the peak of production, one could easily pick 10 lbs every couple of days. These are the ones we hand out to neighbours as they walk to the mailbox but we had so many of them we tried to use them up in a couple different ways. One of our experiments was to make



cucumber chips from them. They were drenched in salt and vinegar and then dehydrated to make an excellent and healthy snack. Another product we made was from all the skins of cucumbers that we peeled – and we had a lot. I read cucumbers have a very high phosphorus content so we saved all the skins, dehydrated them and made a coarse powder to mix in with soil for potting up valuable plants. Not much was wasted from our cucumber patch this year.

Last and definitely the least is the **Mexican Sour Gherkin**. Sold in stores as a **Cucamelon** it looks like a mini-watermelon. It has a strong flavour and makes a tasty pickle.

Eaten primarily as a snack when passing by a raised bed, these little guys are planted along with other plants like tomatoes where they wind their way up stalks to reach sunlight.

They provide me with a chuckle during garden tours when I tell people they are a mini-watermelon. And they look just like one. What is your favourite cucumber?

