

Anyone Growing Langeland Giants?

By Al Chomica

Langeland Giants, *Cucumis sativus*, are a rare variety of cucumber that came into my life a few years ago when Dagny Nielson, one of our 'life-long' garden club members, gave me a taste of her special pickles called Asiers. I was hooked on the first bite! The 'Lizard' as it is called, was firm and crunchy with a white translucent flesh. It was somewhat reminiscent of bread and butter pickles – but far superior. Dagny said she brought the seed from Denmark over 40 years ago and that she originally got the seed from her grandmother. It made me wonder if her grandmother got the seed from her grandmother as well. I recognized the fact that this was a true family heirloom that spanned generations. Dagny graciously shared a couple of these valuable seeds so I could grow them myself and include them in our annual lineup of tasty preserves. The steps taken to actually get to that point were fairly unusual and interesting enough to share.

I asked Dagny for her recipe and she pulled out a 1932 recipe book written in Danish. As she interpreted the recipe for me I eagerly scribbled down notes but scratched my head when she described the process because the Asiers were prepared in an earthenware crock. The recipe indicated the Asiers were halved and seeded into boat shapes that stayed in this crock as huge sides that were pulled out of the brine when serving them up. They would get sliced up into 'lizards' as needed and were served on a special dish reserved just for the Asiers. Then the sides would be put back into the brine again.

I wasn't familiar with the crock process because I can my pickles the new-fangled way using Mason jars. I mentioned this to Dagny and she informed me that they didn't have jars in Denmark back in the 1920s and 30s so canning and preserving was all done in crocks. They didn't have refrigeration either for that matter. It reminded me of the life my grandparents lived when I was a young child. They lived on a farm without electricity back in the 50s and raised the animals they ate.

When they butchered a pig, they coated it heavily with a rub of ground pepper and stored it in a screened-in larder up a tree that sat out in the breeze where it would keep for weeks. They also used several crocks to preserve, ferment or pickle different foods. Obviously, I was going to have to modify this Asier recipe to suit my lack of a traditional skillset.





As my two Langeland Giant plants grew I read up about them online. Amazingly, they are a special giant breed of cucumber holding a Guinness Book of World Records for size and weight. A website showed pictures of one that was over 36 inches long. One of my plants grew three cucumbers over the season. One of them was a beast weighing in at six pounds while the other two were five and four pounds. Fifteen pounds of cucumber from one plant! A good harvest to my mind. This is not a big, over

ripe cucumber; the seeds are not even fully developed yet. It truly is a giant.

The recipe called for salting the sides of cucumber, which in my experience draws out the moisture making the cucumber very crunchy in a desirable way. When my first cucumbers were big enough, I decided to tackle the art of making Asiers. I found the seed core tiny and the flesh was pure white. Using coarse sea salt, I drew the water out of them but made the critical mistake of not freshening them afterward. Freshening is soaking them in fresh water to draw out the excess of salt. I went ahead and made the recipe, canned them in jars and sealed them with a water bath. After waiting a week they were sampled to discover they were so salty that the entire batch had to be discarded. Good thing I had many more cucumbers.

After freshening my second batch another issue came up with sugar. We do not use white sugar except for feeding the hummingbirds so I made the brine as sweet as I like it with an organic sweetener made from birch trees. I assembled all the ingredients again, canned them and waited a week before racing over to Dagny's place where I wanted her to authenticate the batch I had so proudly concocted. Well, she almost spit the first mouthful out and said it was not sweet enough. Sadly, Batch #2 was also discarded, and the recipe was modified again. But I still had lots more where those came from, so I proceeded on with Batch #3.



Batch #3 was canned and left to sit for a week for the flavours to set. The salt was freshened out and the sweetener was increased. I grabbed a jar and bolted back to Dagny's place to see if it would earn her seal of approval.

She took a lizard out of the jar, gave it a couple of crunchy chews and slurped it down. She had a smile on her face and said, "It's good". Whew, I finally figured out the recipe.

There were still enough cucumbers growing to allow me to make two more batches of Dagny-authenticated Asiers in 2017.

This year, in 2018, I grew three plants that produced so many giant cucumbers that I made four batches of Asiers. But the best of all was that Dagny, now in her 90s, didn't grow a garden this year and I was able to provide her with a couple of big Giants. She was able to make her own Asiers as she has done for most of her life. It's good to spread heirloom seeds around in other gardens, don't you think? It felt good to give back . . .