

Growing Bitter Melon for Caribbean Customers in the Northeast

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Caribbean customers from a wide variety of countries eat three different types of bitter melon:

- Long (10-16 inches long). These are light green, with rounded bumps. Lighter fruits are less bitter.
- Small (4-8 inches). These are usually darker green, with rounded bumps, and are more bitter. The smaller fruits are used for their bitter flavor, and may be eaten stuffed.
- Spiky (4-8 inches). These were not grown in this trial, but are normally darker green and more bitter. In Brooklyn, they generally command a higher price (\$2 and up in local stores).
- Leaves, fresh but especially dried. These are used for medicinal teas.

Preferences seem to be based on individual taste and on cooking method, rather than country of origin. All vendors also commented that the bitter melon had three benefits as a market crop:

- It generated “buzz.” Customers explained to other customers (who weren’t from the Caribbean) about cooking methods, about health benefits, and about how the crop tastes.
- Bitter melon generated many return customers.
- In the lower-income neighborhood where we were selling, bitter melon customers seemed to be more likely to spend cash than FMNP coupons.

Timing

Bitter melon is a tender crop, in the same family as cucumbers. Plants are long-

lasting, and continue to produce through frost, though production peaks in August and September. We recommend starting seeds approximately 3-4 weeks before planting outdoors (around Apr 20th in New York City). Seeds can be rubbed with sandpaper to break through the hard coating before planting, but either way germination tends to be poor (approximately 65%).



Here, you can see a seedling that has just been planted into black plastic at the United Community Centers Garden, June 1, 2005.

Planting

Seedlings should be planted outside after danger of frost is past (late May in New York City). We planted seedlings in a double row, with rows 2 feet apart and plants 18” apart within the row. Plants need to be trellised, to control vines, prevent deformed or discolored fruit, and to allow for maximum production. We planted into black plastic, to maximize moisture and heat, and this seemed to work well.



Plants were trellised in a double-row.

Harvest

Fruits were harvested beginning in late July, through the end of October. Fruits should be harvested when they are plump but still green. If allowed to ripen, they turn orange and sweet, at which point customers no longer want them (One Chinese customer made a sauce with the ripe fruit, but most bitter melon in Asian cuisine is also eaten green.) We harvested every three days. Fruits are delicate and prone to bruising. They can be kept refrigerated for several days but not longer.

Leaves were harvested beginning in September, once plants had reached a size sufficient that harvesting fresh leaves did not interfere with fruit production.



This bitter melon is ready to pick.



Bitter melons left on the vine ripen to orange. On this one, fruit has split, showing the seeds (red).

Pricing

Prices in Caribbean grocery stores varied from \$1.50- \$2.25 per lb, with more charged for spiky fruits. Based on this, we charged \$1.75-\$2.00 per lb for smooth fruits (both long and small), and would recommend \$2.00- \$2.25 per lb for the spiky fruit.

Labeling

Customers generally referred to the long and short smooth types of bitter melon as either *bitter melon* or *karela*. Spiky fruits are generally referred to as *karela*, or occasionally *soracee*. The leaves were referred to as *soracee* or *bitters*.



Youth intern Joemi Regalado bringing karela to market, summer 2005.

Varieties

We planted two varieties of long fruits: Kiew Yoke (from Johnny's Selected Seeds) and Hybrid Jumbo (from Evergreen Seeds). Of these two, overall yields of Hybrid Jumbo were slightly higher, particularly in the second half of the season.

We planted one variety of small fruit: Taiwan Large (available from Evergreen Seeds). These plants produced less pounds than the long variety, but an equal or greater number of fruits. One grower planted a small amount of another small variety (Hong Kong Green, available from Evergreen Seeds), but not enough to compare yields.

Pests

Crops did not suffer from any significant pests or pest damage during our trials.

Additional Crops

During our customer surveys, we asked them what other Caribbean crops they would like us to grow. Crops suggested were long beans (*bora*), hot peppers (*cayenne*, *scotch bonnet*, and *habanero*), okra, bok choy (*pak choy*), and squash (*kabocha* types).

For more information, please contact East New York Farms!, United Community Centers, 613 New Lots Ave, Brooklyn, NY 11207, (718) 649-7979.