

Courgettes shape up



Courgettes are now available to home gardeners in an increasing range of shapes, sizes and colours. Turning his back on supermarket uniformity, Ian Hodgson grew no fewer than 32 different cultivars in his garden last year and admired the subtle variety of flavours

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In cookery and in the garden, courgettes seem always to be part of the chorus, never the soloist. Inevitably they end up as insipid filling, rarely stimulating either the palate or the planting palette. Once they begin cropping, most gardeners become overwhelmed by the glut of fruit and end up giving them away.

In our indifference, we might be misjudging courgettes, but that may soon change. Forget the nondescript green regiments on the supermarket shelves: there is a parallel world of courgettes, inhabited by colourful characters that can make you smile, and perhaps even surprise you with differences in flavour and texture.

Last year I decided to examine the remarkable diversity of courgettes now available to home gardeners by

growing as many different cultivars as I could: 32 in total, from the latest sleek F₁ hybrids to the downright weird. For comparison I also included a 'pattypan' summer squash, a close relative that can also be grown and used as a courgette.

Rewarding to grow

Courgettes are well established in cultivation. They were selected from a South American cucumber family species, *Cucurbita pepo*, which came to Europe in the 16th century. Long popular, around the Mediterranean especially, today courgettes are widely cultivated for their young fruit. These are picked immature, about 10–15cm (4–6in) long for elongate types and 7.5cm (3in) in diameter for globe shaped. You can let them grow larger, but they develop thicker skins

and are often less palatable. Marrows are also selected from *C. pepo*, and it has often been said marrows are just large courgettes, though there are differences between cultivars of the two (see box, p72).

Modern courgettes produce a succession of fruit through the main cropping season, from mid-June to late August or beyond. They are monoecious (produce separate male and female flowers on the same plant) and are cross-pollinated by insects, but this is not critical as infertile courgette fruit will still form without pollination.

The flowers of courgettes can also be eaten, raw in salads or dipped in batter and deep fried. If you want plenty of flowers to eat, an Italian cultivar 'Da Fiore Toscana' produces mostly male blooms and is ideal for this purpose. >>

My home trial

All the cultivars I tried grew well (for advice on sowing and growing courgettes, see p73) but unfortunately a prolonged dry spell during July and August 2010 caused most to stop producing by mid-August, and hastened an attack of powdery mildew. Although this brought harvesting to a premature end, it did at least provide an acid test of performance in typically challenging UK growing conditions.

For my recommendations see p74; the full results are available online.

Impressive globe-fruited cultivars included 'Brice' 14, 'Floridor' 16, 'One Ball' 15, and 'Summer Ball' 12. All were prolific to the end, and did not quickly expand into the airships produced by many cultivars with more elongate fruit. The yellow, green-starred fruit of 'One Ball' and 'Floridor' were especially attractive, the latter probably being my favourite cultivar for appearance, productivity and culinary excellence. Compact and decorative, it should do well in pots.

Of the elongate types, many of the yellow cultivars outperformed their traditional green cousins, especially 'Soleil' 4, 'Gold Rush' 17 and 'Buckingham' 21, which became summer-long conveyor belts of thin-skinned, high-quality fruit of good flavour. Some cultivars such as 'Alberello' 26 and 'Novodiamant' 20 have attractive silver-blotched foliage.

Tasty novelties

Growing edible plants can also be about having fun, and a trio of cultivars did raise smiles: Italian courgettes 'Lungo Bianco' 10 and 'Rugosa Friulana' 24, and a pattypan squash, 'Custard White' 18. The first produced acceptable crops of pale green-ribbed fruit, but if you fail to harvest quickly they soon transform into sinuous, pale-bodied anacondas.

Starting life as a lumpy juvenile, 'Rugosa Friulana' quickly covered itself in grotesque warty growths that look like they must render it inedible. Not so: the skin is thin and fruits have a delicious flavour and firm flesh, although if not picked regularly, fruits resting on wet soil soon rotted. Dry conditions also halt its fruiting.

Pattypan squash 'Custard White' was a revelation. Not only are its fruit attractive, but harvested at 12–15cm

(5–6in) in diameter and sliced or diced, they cook to the consistency of a meaty mushroom. They also store dry for much longer than courgettes. Plants are slower to establish and grow away, but

compensate well by fruiting into September and resisting mildew.

There is much more variation in courgettes than many gardeners realise. They are easy to grow, high yielding and, as with many crops, the flavour of home grown is much superior to the one green type offered by most supermarkets. Do try them: you may find that courgette cookery will never be the same again. ●

What is a courgette, and does it grow up to be a marrow?

Is a marrow just a mature courgette, or a courgette an immature marrow? There are differences: courgettes tend to be bushy plants with thin-skinned fruit (that thickens with age), marrows are more trailing with thicker skins. ❖ Courgettes, marrows, many gourds and squashes, and some pumpkins are all descended from one Central American species, *Cucurbita pepo*. It may be one of man's earliest crops, in cultivation for 8,000-10,000 years – predating beans and maize, crops from the same area, by 4,000 years.

Courgette diversity

Boxed numbers in the text refer to the following courgettes (and a squash), all cultivars of *Cucurbita pepo*:

- 1 'Tondo di Piacenza'
- 2 'Golden Delight'
- 3 'Greyzini'
- 4 'Soleil'
- 5 'Eight Ball'
- 6 'Striato d'Italia'
- 7 'Endurance'
- 8 'Firenze d'Italia'
- 9 'Pasqueline'
- 10 'Lungo Bianco'
- 11 'Romano'
- 12 'Summer Ball'
- 13 'Yolanda'
- 14 'Brice'
- 15 'One Ball'
- 16 'Floridor'
- 17 'Gold Rush'
- 18 squash 'Custard White'
- 19 'Tondo Chiaro di Nizza'
- 20 'Novodiamant'
- 21 'Buckingham'
- 22 'Black Beauty' (syn. 'Nero di Milano')
- 23 'Verde d'Italia'
- 24 'Rugosa Friulana'
- 25 'Genovese'
- 26 'Alberello'

Note: older fruit are presented for illustrative purposes, and prolonged dry conditions in East Anglia in 2010 caused uneven swelling in some of the cultivars represented. ❖ With thanks to Woodston Courgettes



Growing courgettes



Growing tips

- ❖ Courgettes, like many cucumber-family members, are sensitive to low temperatures. Do not plant out until all risk of late frost has passed.
- ❖ Cultivate the ground where they will be grown, mixing in plenty of organic matter, and add a general fertiliser such as growmore. Unprepared, thin or poor soils give disappointing crops.
- ❖ Time sowings to coincide with your conditions: under glass or on a windowsill from late April to early June; outdoors late May to mid-June.
- ❖ Sow seeds individually in 7.5cm (3in) pots or in cell trays. Use a peat-free compost, cover seeds 1cm (½in) deep and water in.
- ❖ Maintain a temperature of 21-25°C (70-77°F); germination takes 7-10 days.
- ❖ Grow seedlings on, planting out when the second or third leaf has appeared, or pot on into individual 12.5cm (5in) pots.
- ❖ Harden plants off carefully before planting outdoors. Space plants 60cm (2ft) apart, with 60-90cm (2-3ft) between rows. Water in thoroughly.
- ❖ Courgettes can also be grown in 30-45cm (12-15in) pots, or two per growing bag. Choose compact cultivars such as 'Defender', 'Midnight' or 'Floridor'.
- ❖ Keep plants moist and fertilise fortnightly with a high-nitrogen liquid feed when in active growth.
- ❖ Harvest regularly to encourage more flowers and new fruit to form.
- ❖ Choose virus- and mildew-resistant cultivars where possible.
- ❖ Plants with virus are stunted, with mottled leaves – remove and destroy plants to avoid others being infected.
- ❖ Powdery mildew is difficult to avoid, especially in dry conditions. It rarely kills plants but reduces vigour and yields. Spray with a fungicide containing difenoconazole (such as Westland Plant Rescue Fungus Control) when symptoms appear. ➤➤



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Courgettes well worth trying

Ian Hodgson (left) tried 32 different courgettes last year. Here are his observations on the best-performing, and most attractive cultivars.

cultivar	fruit type and size	plant habit and size	performance	disease resistance	sources
'Alberello' (syn. 'Alberello di Sarzana')	Elongate, 30 x 10cm (12 x 4in), light green, ribbed, silver speckled	Low, spreading; 60cm (2ft) diameter (diam). Leaf dissected with silver blotches	Good	Mildewed by end of season	Seeds of Italy
'Brice' F ₁	Round, 15cm (6in) diam, ribbed on shoulder, veined and marbled paler	Compact plant 45cm (18in) diam, stalks long, stout and toothed	Good to season end	Late to mildew	Unwins
'Buckingham' F ₁	Elongate, 30 x 5cm (12 x 2in), ribbed, yellow, ripening orange-yellow	Large plants of open habit. Leaves coarse, lobed. Stalks strong, highly toothed	Prolific to end of season	Mildew-affected by end of season	Plants of Distinction, Suttons, Mr Fothergill's
'Eight Ball'	Round, dark green, 15 cm (6in) diam	Compact plant, 45cm (18in) diam, leaves lobed. Stalks rough, toothed, but flexible	Prolific to end of season	Became mildewed	Dobies, Plants of Distinction, Unwins
'Endurance' F ₁	Elongate, 30 x 10cm (12 x 4in), olive green, slightly ribbed	Large, leafy plants, 90cm (3ft) diam. Stalks stout, rough, occasionally toothed	Good	Became mildew-affected	DT Brown, Mr Fothergill's, Suttons
'Floridor' F ₁	Round, 13cm (5in) diam, yellow with green star - highly decorative	Compact plant, 45cm (18in) diam, stalks thin and pliable, not toothed	Copious fruit to end of season	Very late to mildew	DT Brown, Mr Fothergill's
'Gold Rush' F ₁	Elongate, 26 x 10cm (10 x 4in), golden yellow	Compact plant, 45cm (18in) diam, leaves small lobed, stalks short, flexible	Prolific all season	Late to mildew	Seeds of Italy
'One Ball'	Round, 13-15cm (5-6in) diam, yellow with green star. Decorative	Compact plant, 45cm+ (18in) diam. Large leaves, stalks thin, flexible teeth	Prolific to end of season	Slow to mildew	Dobies, Plants of Distinction, Suttons
'Pasqueline' F ₁	Elongate, 30 x 7.5cm (12 x 3in). Dark green with paler green stripes	Open, sparse-leaved habit, 45cm (18in) diam. Highly lobed leaves, long, rough, toothed stalks	Prolific to end of season, dislikes drought	Only mildewed at end of season	DT Brown
'Soleil' F ₁	Elongate, 30 x 7.5cm (12 x 3in). Bright yellow, smooth fruit	Compact plant, 30cm+ (12in) diam, open habit, neat, lobed foliage. Stalks rough and toothed	Prolific to end of season, even in drought	Little affected by mildew	Plants of Distinction, Suttons

Cultivars in commerce

Until the last few years the influx of new courgette cultivars for home gardeners had been largely driven by breeders serving the supermarket and food industries, for whom consistent fruit shape and high yields are paramount. An open growth habit and tooth-free leaf stalks, allowing more efficient harvesting, are also important.

Virus diseases can devastate crops, so resistance to *Cucumber mosaic virus*, *Zucchini yellow mosaic virus* and *Watermelon mosaic virus* is key, along with resistance to powdery mildew, the blight of most courgette crops by high summer.

Courgettes in future

A single cultivar, 'Alexander', is the mainstay of the courgette industry, but new introductions such as 'El Greco', 'Mikonos', 'Naxos', 'Tuscany' and 'Midnight' are finding their way into the trade, and also to home gardeners.

Novelty cultivars both in shape and colour are becoming more familiar in vegetable-box schemes, with round 'Brice', 'One Ball' (inset) and 'Piccolo' now being grown more.

The smooth yellow and paler cultivars have a thinner skin than traditional green or ridged cultivars, and so are more prone to damage and have a shorter shelf life in supermarkets.

Breeders are increasing the range for home gardeners. There is also an influx of Italian 'heritage' cultivars, which are still being evaluated in the UK. Courgette diversity has never been greater or more interesting and we all can benefit from that.



SUPPLIER DETAILS

- ❖ Dobies: 0844 7017623; www.dobies.co.uk
- ❖ DT Brown: 0845 3710532; www.dtbrownseeds.co.uk
- ❖ Mr Fothergill's: 0845 3710518; www.mr-fothergills.co.uk
- ❖ Plants of Distinction: 01449 721720; www.plantsofdistinction.co.uk
- ❖ Seeds of Italy: 0208 4275020; www.seedsofitaly.com
- ❖ Suttons: 0844 9220606; www.suttons.co.uk
- ❖ Unwins: 01480 443395; www.unwins.co.uk

For details of more cultivars and recipes for courgettes, visit 'September 2011' at www.rhs.org.uk/thegarden

