



The Exotic Garden at Garden Organic's headquarters in Ryton where many of the unusual seeds discovered by the Sowing New Seeds team are trialled.

# PRESERVING THE TASTE OF HOME

The Sowing New Seeds project collects and stores seed of exotic crops, grown by varied communities around four cities in the Midlands

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If you have ever lived abroad for any length of time you will know how important the connection is between home and food. Longing for the tastes of your native country can be an ache as painful as homesickness.

So as the UK experienced a wave of immigration from Asia, the Caribbean, South America, Africa and Europe from the 1950s onwards, those new arrivals, many of whom had previously grown their own food in their home countries, understandably wanted to bring the tastes of home with them. When they could not find the exotic ingredients they wanted at the local greengrocer some started to take on allotments, growing the vegetables themselves, obtaining seed from friends and relatives at home and then, as crops matured, saving seed in the process. As a result, a whole new type of plant breeder was born on the allotments of our urban areas, out of necessity saving seed that fared well in our climate and gradually improving the strain through years of patient observation and experiment. The reason that so many of us take for granted the growing and eating of crops such as basil, coriander, spinach and

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From Brazil...

## Plants to dye for

Teresinha Roberts has had her plot on the Walsall Road Allotments in Birmingham for 10 years. She has a degree in biology and is used to saving her own seed, but her main interest is in natural dyes for weaving, so alongside edible crops she grows plants such as woad (*Isatis tinctoria*), madder (*Rubia tinctorum*), dyer's greenweed (*Genista tinctoria*) and lady's bedstraw (*Galium verum*) using the root, leaf or stem as dyestuffs.

### Crops for food

Teresinha grows duck potatoes (*Sagittaria latifolia*), sometimes called wapato (pictured, right), which for centuries have been an important crop for indigenous people of South and North America and have a taste somewhere between a potato and a chestnut. She also grows a type of wild cucumber she calls achocha (*Cyclanthera pedata*), which crops

prolifically under the cover of a small glasshouse on her plot.

Teresinha swaps seeds with her Caribbean neighbours, and is fond of the tasty black-eyed beans (*Vigna unguiculata* subsp. *unguiculata*) that they grow, which she often uses in stews or dries to use during winter.



Teresinha (above) uses her glasshouse to grow crops that require a little more protection. Similar to potatoes, duck potatoes (left) can be eaten raw as well as roasted, fried or boiled.

From Pakistan...

## Unusual squashes

One of the stalwart growers of Walsall Road, who has had an allotment there for more than 20 years, Muhammad Alam is originally from Pakistan. He is regarded as a champion grower not least for the quality and size of the unusual pumpkins he grows.

Each year, if the summer is a good one and they have ripened well, he takes his pumpkins down to a local Sikh temple where they cook them to provide free food for the community.

### Indian baby pumpkin

Tinda (*Praecitrullus fistulosus*) are just one of many unusual squashes that Muhammad grows on his allotment. This apple-sized gourd grows in India during the monsoon months and resembles a small, smooth-skinned green tomato - it is delicious cooked with dry spices such as cumin, coriander and turmeric and made into a curry. Tinda is a Punjabi



Muhammad slices into a tinda (above). These small gourds are sometimes called Indian baby pumpkins.

nickname for these small, tender fruits, the skin of which can be dark or (preferably) light green. The seeds can also be roasted and eaten.

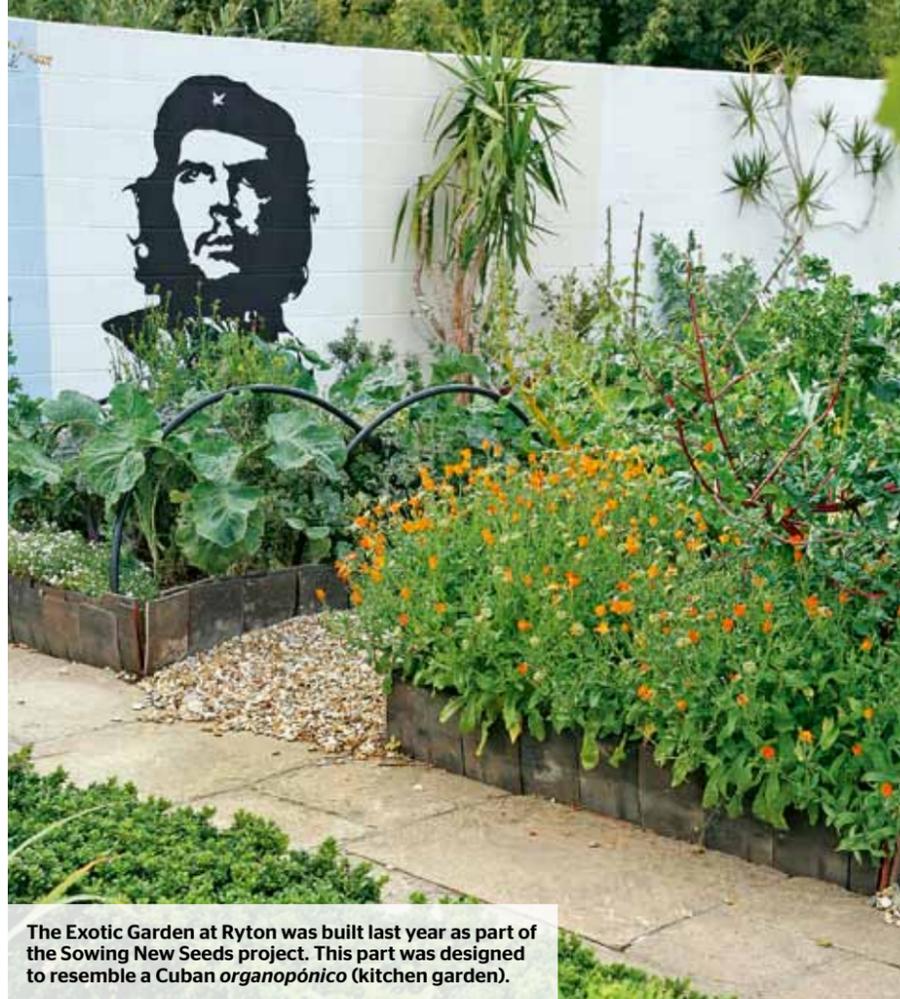
squashes is down in part to that expansion in the variety of produce brought about by those first immigrants.

### Preserving knowledge and seed

In 2010 two people with an interest in exotic seed from the charity Garden Organic, Anton Rosenfeld and Sally Cunningham, decided that these unusual crops needed finding, recording and making more widely available. 'We were aware that the knowledge was stored in people's heads and the genetic material was in old coffee jars in their sheds,' says Anton. 'We thought that it was a huge resource which was in danger of being lost because so many of that first wave of immigrants were now quite elderly and the knowledge wasn't being passed down.'

With money from the Big Lottery Fund's Local Food programme the Sowing New Seeds project started. It has led Sally and Anton on an odyssey around the gardens and allotments of the Midlands in search of crops such as callaloo (*Amaranthus*), dudi (*Lagenaria siceraria*), black-eyed beans and achocha (*Cyclanthera pedata*). They found more than 250 types of exotic seed and a wealth of invaluable growing experience.

The pair visited Birmingham, Coventry, Leicester and Nottingham. A particularly rich source of seeds was discovered at Walsall Road Allotments in Birmingham where people from 14 countries (including Kenya, Iraq, Bangladesh and Mauritius), were growing all kinds of exotic crops. They visited on weekday evenings and weekend mornings, and handed out questionnaires as well as speaking to people and finding out what they were growing. They found that the quality and variety of produce far exceeded what they expected. Vegetables that should be tricky to grow in this country had adapted to our climate through careful selection of seed. For example, a lablab bean (*Lablab purpureus*), which is commonly found throughout the tropics, had been adapted to our relatively short growing season and cold weather and was cropping prolifically. Other surprise finds include crops that sound as if they belong in a horticultural museum of curiosities – shark fin melon (*Cucurbita ficifolia*), Vietnamese mustard (a selection of *Brassica juncea*), yard-long bean (*Vigna unguiculata* subsp. *sesquipedalis*)



The Exotic Garden at Ryton was built last year as part of the Sowing New Seeds project. This part was designed to resemble a Cuban *organopónico* (kitchen garden).

**VISIT FREE**  
Ryton Gardens (Garden Organic Ryton), Ryton-on-Dunsmore, Coventry CV8 3LG (024 7630 3517; [www.gardenorganic.org.uk](http://www.gardenorganic.org.uk)) is an RHS Partner Garden offering free access to members. See *RHS Members' Handbook 2012*, p97.

and Portuguese cabbage or couve tronchuda (a selection of *Brassica oleracea* Tronchuda Group).

During the past two years seeds have been collected and trialled in the Exotic Garden at Garden Organic, Ryton near Coventry. Many of these will be available through the organisation's Heritage Seed Library which safeguards rare seeds and makes them available to members. Seed swaps have become a familiar part of life at the allotments, schools and community groups that Anton and Sally visited, and through the project it is hoped that both knowledge and seeds will become more available for everyone to grow, eat and enjoy. ●



Lablab bean growing on the Walsall Road Allotments.



Shark fin melon (*Cucurbita ficifolia*).



*Amaranthus*, known as callaloo, is a common Caribbean ingredient.



A cucumber from India known locally as khira and grown by Shadi and Nirmal Ram.

From India...

## Culinary vegetables

Shadi and Nirmal Ram, who also grow food in their back garden in Birmingham, have only had their allotment for three years but are already growing produce from their native India with amazing success. Their traditional diet is rich in vegetables and so Shadi and Nirmal grow broccoli, cabbage, kale and salad crops. Recently they returned to India and brought back local seed of vegetables that are not available here.

Following that visit they have been growing several different types of pumpkin, chickpeas (*Cicer arietinum*), Indian mustard (a selection of *Brassica juncea*), radish, coriander, okra (*Abelmoschus esculentus*), a spinach-like crop they call chilai (also known as chaulai or callaloo; see below) and a type of cucumber called keera or khira (*Cucumis sativus*; pictured, p52).

Shadi and Nirmal spend many hours at their allotment and Nirmal is a natural cook, eager to share her



Nirmal and Shadi (right) pick chickpeas green (above) then roast them in the oven to add texture to curries.

knowledge of the different types of vegetables and salad crops from India, and the best ways in which to prepare them.



From the Caribbean...

## Family favourites



Basil McFarlane has only had his plot for 18 months and often comes down with his mother, Mabel, who is a keen gardener and cook. He is one of the younger members of the Walsall Road Allotments and has already become something of a legend for the speed with which he dug over his weedy plot.

Basil grows potatoes, pumpkins, tomatoes, sweet corn and salad crops, but also large amounts of callaloo (*Amaranthus*), a leafy green vegetable similar to spinach which originates from the Caribbean. If it is left to flower it has a spectacular dark red seedhead.

There are as many different ways of preparing and eating callaloo as there are islands in the Caribbean, but the basic ingredients that normally accompany it include other vegetables such as tomatoes, onions, squash and herbs and a fair sprinkling of hot chillies, a staple of West Indian cuisine. Sometimes it is eaten as a thick soup, other times it accompanies a meat dish and is used as a sauce.

### SEED PROJECT

If you have seeds of interest to the project, visit: [www.sowingnewseeds.org.uk](http://www.sowingnewseeds.org.uk) or call Anton Rosenfeld on 024 7621 7738.

### SUPPLIERS

Many crops mentioned are not readily available, but suppliers of unusual seeds include:

- ❖ **DT Brown** has a 'World of Veg' range of seeds. Visit: [www.dtbrownseeds.co.uk](http://www.dtbrownseeds.co.uk)
- ❖ **Johnsons Seeds** offers 'World Kitchen' collection: [www.johnsons-seeds.com](http://www.johnsons-seeds.com)
- ❖ **W Robinson & Son** lists unusual cucurbits, including kiwano and karella. [www.mammothion.co.uk](http://www.mammothion.co.uk)

### RHS ADVICE

Official guidance on importing seeds and plant material is available from FERA: see 'Advice for Travellers' at [www.fera.defra.gov.uk](http://www.fera.defra.gov.uk); 01904 455174.

- ❖ Diseased or pest-infested material must never be imported.