

Think outside the vegetable box

With up to 2,000 edible plant species that we could grow in our climate, many far removed from traditional allotment vegetables, are you missing out on some tasty crops?

Author and photographer: James Wong, a Kew-trained botanist, writer and broadcaster

A wealth of colourful, tasty fruits and vegetables (left) are often ignored by UK gardeners, despite being easy to grow.

Many horticultural textbooks would have you believe there are only 20 or so crops of edible plants that can be grown in the UK. Indeed, if you compare my grandfather's Dig for Victory pamphlet with the most recent downloadable 'grow your own' app, the contents are virtually identical – barring aubergines, peppers and, if you are lucky, chillies.

Yet with up to 2,000 edible crops that could theoretically thrive in

our climate, I cannot help but feel gardeners are ignoring up to 90 percent of the edible plants they could grow. As a botanist I have long been puzzled by this situation. Is it because these 'alternative veg' are thought to be poor yielding, difficult to grow or might not make good eating? After all, there is an enormous difference between 'technically edible' and 'worth eating'.

However, 100 years or so ago, commercial growers raised, outdoors, an enormous range of what we now consider exotics. Everything from

saffron (*Crocus sativus*) to cocktail kiwis (*Actinidia arguta*), Chilean guavas (*Ugni molinae*) and quinces (*Cydonia oblonga*) were cultivated.

Trialling at home

Frustrated by the lack of reliable data that could help me to get to the bottom of this conundrum, I decided to investigate the potential of under-used species as 'crops of the future' for the home gardener. In three years I grew more than 200 crops – from sweet potatoes to wasabi – in my small suburban garden in



Chickpea (*Cicer arietinum*)

Sow: seed in April
Harvest: September

I love the nutty pods of edamame (soya) beans you get in Japanese restaurants, but have failed to grow them. Young chickpeas, however, can be eaten rather like edamame; the young green pods have a sweeter flavour, rather like a cross between pistachios and garden peas, and I have found them far easier to grow.

Sow outdoors 15cm (6in) apart in a sunny bed. Plants are drought tolerant and do not need feeding, yet produce hundreds of pods per square metre for little effort. The cultivar 'Principe', while its peas are smaller than those on sale dried in supermarkets, fares well in our cool summers.



Cocktail kiwi (*Actinidia arguta*)

Plant: plants in spring
Harvest: September

Hailing from northeast Asia, up into Siberia, these rampant but hardy vines will survive -35°C (-31°F). Mature plants produce up to 400 grape-sized mini kiwis, with fuzz-free, edible skins and flesh sweeter than rock-hard ones sold in supermarkets.

Plants like a sunny site with deep, rich soil and will need sturdy supports to clamber over. They can grow to 6m (20ft) if untrained; I spur-prune mine in summer, cutting long shoots back by half every three weeks to maximise yield. This results in shorter, stubbier plants. Of the many cultivars, I would choose a self-fertile selection such as 'Issai'.



Cape gooseberry (*Physalis peruviana*)

Sow: seed March or April
Harvest: October-December

Despite their unusual appearance, each berry wrapped in a paper lantern, Cape gooseberries have been reliable outdoors in some dreadful summers for me. Drought- and disease-resistant, the plants need no pruning, training or fertilising to reward you with good harvests as late as early December.

Most textbooks advocate growing under glass but I have achieved the best harvests by growing plants hard, outdoors in poor, well-drained soil in full sun. With an autumn mulch in mild areas they may prove perennial, but they are easy to start indoors from seed, sown as for tomatoes.



Chilean guava (*Ugni molinae*)

Plant: plants in spring
Harvest: late summer

I love the fragrant berries of Chilean guavas, reputedly Queen Victoria's favourite fruit. Less fussy than blueberries, these productive bushes offer glossy evergreen foliage and scented, bell-like flowers. Rebranded by Australian growers as Tazziberries, a tiny punnet costs at least £9 – but plants can be cultivated easily in gardens, fruiting even in light shade.

Established plants grow well outdoors in mild areas, but they are also happy in pots and can be put in a cold glasshouse in freezing weather. I recommend planting large-fruited 'Ka-pow!', which produces sizeable berries on dwarf plants.

Unusual edibles

Croydon, South London. Everything was grown outdoors over three of the worst summers and two of the coldest winters on record, with their yields and ease of cultivation measured and compared to potatoes and tomatoes grown alongside them. Assessing flavour was, of course, a key factor in my selection with each crop sampled by a panel of four people (family and neighbours). With intentionally strict criteria, I was genuinely surprised to find that roughly 40 percent of the crops passed my tests with flying colours.

Exotic yet easy

The perplexing thing, it turns out, is that many of the chicest, exotic ingredients that are currently flown in from the other side of the globe are often as easy, if not easier, than allotment staples – at least in my experience. I am not advocating the wholesale abandonment of old favourites, as garden-fresh sweet corn, early peas and heritage tomatoes take some beating, but my experimentation shows there is huge potential out there for thinking well beyond spuds, sprouts and swedes. ●

RHS GROW YOUR OWN

James Wong is giving one of the talks at RHS Garden Wisley during **Grow Your Own Weekend** (23-24 March), which is being held at all four RHS Gardens (see RHS Life, p90).
❖ See p91 for your free seeds.



SUPPLIER DETAILS

❖ For plants, see *RHS Plant Finder 2013*.
❖ For seed: **Suttons**: 0844 922 0606; www.suttons.co.uk. **Thompson & Morgan**: 0844 573 1818; www.thompson-morgan.com.
Franchi Seeds: 020 8427 5020; www.seedsofitaly.com.

Cucamelon (*Zehneria scabra* syn. *Melothria scabra*)

Sow: April **Harvest:** August

Lilliputian 'watermelons' that taste of cucumber with a tinge of lime, these fruit grow on slender vines and are perfect for patio pots, or even hanging baskets. Cool-tolerant enough to fruit well outdoors in mild regions, they are even more productive if grown under cover. Grow cucamelon annually from seed raised under glass as you would cucumber. Alternatively, lift their radish-like roots in autumn and treat like dahlias, storing them over winter and planting out in spring after risk of frost has passed; this method will provide earlier crops of fruit.



Pineapple guava (*Acca sellowiana*)

Plant: plants in spring
Harvest: late summer-autumn

If you have a sheltered, south-facing wall you couldn't do much better than a pair of pineapple guava (feijoa) bushes. These evergreens produce fragrant fruit which follow pink pompon flowers that have fleshy, edible, sweet-tasting petals.

Grow feijoas as you would olives, planting in full sun in well-drained soil. Grow in pairs to ensure cross-pollination; an open, airy canopy also helps. Most plants grown in the UK are clipped tight against walls, possibly why they seldom fruit freely. Get it right and you are onto a winner.



GETTY/PHOTOS LAMONTAGNE



Saffron (*Crocus sativus*)

Plant: corms in late summer
Harvest: autumn

Saffron was grown in the UK on a commercial scale for centuries, and ours was once considered the world's finest. Saffron Hill and Saffron Walden were named after their thriving plantations of this luxury spice, and it is still grown commercially in North Wales.

Saffron is low maintenance and needs sharply drained, neutral soil in full sun, with six weeks of temperatures above 20°C (68°F) while dormant in July and August. I have provided this even in miserable summers by growing under cloches and have achieved respectable harvests.



New Zealand yam (*Oxalis tuberosa*)

Plant: tubers in April
Harvest: October-December

Cultivated by the Inca of South America, these colourful tubers grow in the Andean highlands at high altitude. Resistant to blight, they were trialed as a successor to potatoes in the Irish famines and were introduced across the British Empire. In New Zealand they are still a much-loved vegetable.

Start tubers in pots of compost on a windowsill and plant in a sunny site after frosts have passed. Tubers need a long season; place cloches over plants to improve yields in areas with early frosts. Harvest two to three weeks after growth has been frosted.