

# The Alternative Kitchen Garden

## Episode 63 transcript



Hello, and welcome to episode 63 of the Alternative Kitchen Garden. I'm Emma and today we're going to be talking about a bit of an unusual plant, but before that I have a couple of announcements for you. The first is that the nominations are in, in the Mouse & Trowel awards, and those are the awards for gardening blogs, websites and podcasts – and the Alternative Kitchen Garden has been nominated for the Best Garden Podcast award. So if you fancy voting for the Alternative Kitchen Garden or for your favourite blogger or garden website, pop along to <http://www.mouseandtrowel.org/> before May 13<sup>th</sup> to have your say.

The second thing is that it's Earth Day on Tuesday, that's 22<sup>nd</sup> April, and Earth Day is the international day when we celebrate just what a wonderful planet Earth is (where would we be without her?) and make a small change, or a large change, in our lives to make our lives more environmentally sound, or just enjoy living on Earth for the day. So that's Tuesday – April 22<sup>nd</sup> is Earth Day. I will put both those links in the show notes for you.

So today we're taking a bit of a walk on the unusual side, and I'm going to be talking about achocha, which is pretty much the first unusual edible plant that I grew. Achocha is known as one of the Lost Crops of the Incas, because it used to be one of the staple foods of the Incas, but it's one of the ones that didn't transfer to Western civilization. Potatoes, of course, we're all very aware of, and tomatoes and things like that that came from South America in the first place. But achocha is one of the things that didn't, for some reason. It hasn't become particularly popular.

It's a climbing plant, it's a member of the same family as squash and cucumbers, and you can get seeds from heritage and heirloom seed suppliers. In the UK you can get seeds from Real Seeds, or you can become a member of Garden Organic's Heritage Seed Library and get some seeds that way. Or, if you're lucky, you can find some through an online swap from someone who already has it or has grown the plant and

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saved their own seeds. It doesn't cross-pollinate with other members of the same family in your garden, so it's easy to save seeds from, so once you've grown it once you'll be able to share it with all your friends.

There are two separate species of achocha. The one that I grow (and I got my seeds from the Heritage Seed Library) is called Lady's Slipper, and that's *Cyclanthera pedata*. I'll put the Latin names in the show notes, but (as ever) you have to take my pronunciation with a pinch of salt. Lady's Slipper achocha grows its fruit in pairs, and they are smooth-skinned fruits. The second species is called Fat Baby, and that's *Cyclanthera brachystachya*, and that's what you'll get if you buy your seeds from Real Seeds. And it grows its fruits singly, but they are the ones that you might have seen pictures of – they are the ones with soft, fleshy spines. So if you want the ones with the fleshy spines, that's Fat Baby.

Real Seeds also have the seeds of achocha's close relative the Exploding Cucumber (*Cyclanthera explodens*). And it comes with a health warning, because if you grow the exploding cucumber what happens is that when the fruits are mature they spring open and spray their seeds out at quite a high velocity. So if you're in the way when it does it you are likely to get one in the eye! So they are a little bit dangerous, but if you're into dangerous gardening – extreme gardening – then that one might be for you.

All of these plants are very easy to grow, they're grown like climbing beans. They're frost tender, so you'd sow them indoors a few weeks before the last frost date or outside after the risk of frost has passed. They don't mind being transplanted.

As I said, they're climbing plants and they climb with tendrils, so they need to be planted out before they start tangling into each other. And they will need some support. They're very good up trellises, or arches, or you can build them wigwams or something like that. They are very vigorous plants, they can grow over 3 m tall and wide and they make a great screen. If you've got something ugly in your garden or you want a bit of privacy this summer, they make a very good screen for something until the first frost comes.

They're not particularly fussy about the soil they grow in. I grew mine, the first time, in containers on the patio. And this was during a time when gardening was not the highest priority in my life, and so they didn't get fed and they probably didn't get as much water as they would have liked – so they are fairly drought resistant, although you will get better crops with additional water, if it's dry. I suspect that too much nitrogen probably promotes leafy growth rather than fruiting, as with all fruiting plants, so don't over-feed them.

The flowers are hard to spot. They're tiny and they're pale green, and they will probably pass you by until you notice the hoverflies hanging around. Because hoverflies absolutely love achocha flowers, and they're much better at finding them than we are. The nice thing about hoverflies, of course, is that they're one of the beneficial insects to have in your garden, so anything that feeds hoverflies is good.

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The flowers are followed by dark green fruits, and they're easier to see (even when they're small) because they stand out against the foliage – which is a sort of lime green colour. And they are an interesting shape, right from the word go. They're sometimes described as tear-drop shaped; I think they look a bit more like a gnome's hat.

They grow fairly quickly. When they're young and small they're edible raw. When they grow a bit larger you'll want to slice them up and cook them. You want to pick them when they're about an inch or 3 to 4 cm long. They're much nicer when they're young and also harvesting them early promotes more fruit on the plants.

They're generally described as having a flavour similar to green pepper. I wouldn't personally describe it as green pepper, but it is a very 'green' flavour. If you're going to eat it raw then it's probably a bit of an acquired taste, but they're good cooked. You can slice them onto pizza, into stir-fries, you can curry them, you can do lots of things with them. If you've got the patience of a saint you can even stuff them (they're not that large). When they get towards their final size you need to remove the hard seeds inside before you eat them, otherwise you're going to break your teeth. And you can use them pretty much like cucumbers, and pickle them and things like that. So they are very versatile, which is a good job because they are prolific fruiterers. They're very vigorous plants, and they will keep fruiting, and keep fruiting and keep fruiting.

The seeds themselves are hard and black, so they're very easy to see once you open up the fruits. They are a very unusual shape, a bit like a stealth bomber, and they're easily removed and kept and saved and shared with your friends. So if you get to the end of the season and you've got some mature fruits on your achocha vines then, by all means, save the seeds and share them with your friends and keep them to grow next year.

The nice thing about achocha is that it's very pest and disease resistant. The only problem you're likely to have is slugs, when the plants are young. But as soon as they start to climb with any sort of vigour then they will grow away from the slugs and the snails and they just won't be able to keep up.

The plants prefer warm weather to hot, so if you live in a very hot climate then they will probably appreciate a spot where they get some shade, so they're not in full sun all of the day. And other than that, they're really easy. So if you can get your hands on some achocha seeds, now is a good time to plant them in the UK. I put mine in a few days ago. And it's a great plant for making use of vertical spaces. It will climb up a wall or a fence perfectly happily, if it has got something to cling onto, and give you a very useful crop from a very small space.

If you read about achocha on the internet, then you'll see that there are some people that have reservations about growing it. It's not a weed, because it gets killed by the frost, but it is a very vigorous plant and you will get lots and lots of fruit. So if you like them, that's a very good thing. Some people don't think that they're actually that yummy, but that is very much a personal taste kind of thing.

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However, it is a very interesting plant and it will be a talking point in your garden, so even if you can't find anybody to eat the fruits it will be fun growing it for a year.

And it would be a great plant to grow with children, because it just grows so fast and also because they'll be able to hunt for the flowers and watch the hoverflies and also they'll be able to pick these tiny little fruits. They might like eating them raw, they might not, but they are a very interesting shape, so it is a very fun plant for children. So that might be a reason for growing it, even if you're not entirely convinced that you might like to eat it.

My final word on the subject of achocha is that when we grew it a couple of years ago and we had some spare fruits left over because we weren't eating them quite fast enough, I chopped them up and fed them to the chickens and the chickens were very happy to eat them. So if you've got chickens, that's another way you could dispose of any achocha glut.

As usual, if you've got any stories about growing achocha or any other unusual edibles in your garden, you can send me an email to [akgpodcast@gmail.com](mailto:akgpodcast@gmail.com), leave a comment on the show home page (that's <http://coopette.com/akg>) or start a discussion in the Facebook group. I'd be interested to hear your hints and tips and stories, and I'm sure everybody else would be too. In the meantime, have a great week in you garden. Goodbye!

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