

THE LADY'S SLIPPER, THE FAT BABY & THE EXPLODING CUCUMBER

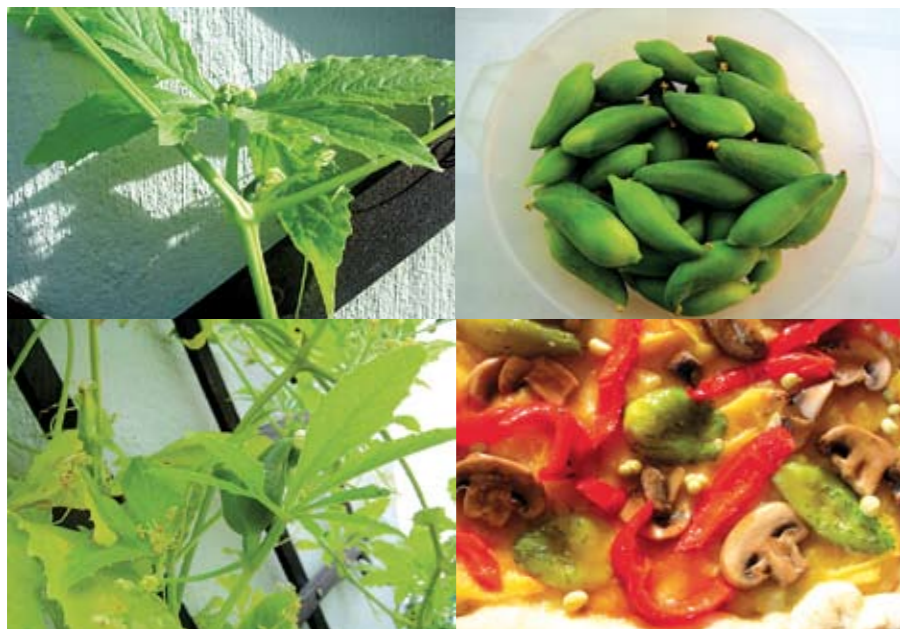
plants with tendrils and will need something to scramble up. Once established they can be quite rampant, and make a good temporary screen or covering for an arch or pergola. Unhindered, the vines can reach 4.5m (15ft). They are unlikely to need feeding, but will appreciate plenty of water.

Achocha flowers are tiny and pale green. Lost amongst the lush foliage they are difficult to spot, but are popular to hoverflies. The leaves and young shoots are reported to be edible, but the plant is mainly grown for its fruit. The self-fertile flowers are followed by green, teardrop shaped fruit.

Achocha fruits can be eaten raw when immature (up to 6cm/2½in long) but older fruits are best cooked and you will need to remove the seeds.

also poised to make a comeback. *Cyclanthera explodens*, the exploding cucumber, is not for the faint-hearted, however. Grown and used in the same way as achocha, the fruits of the exploding cucumber burst open when ripe and spray out their seeds at considerable speed. Despite the potential hazards, the exploding cucumber is bound to be a favourite with extreme gardeners everywhere.

N.B. Exploding cucumbers do pose a genuine health hazard as the seeds are ejected at great speed and can cause serious eye injuries. They should only be handled and processed by adults wearing suitable eye protection until they have fully opened. The seeds can travel some distance, so be cautious.



Emma Cooper introduces Achocha, an ancient food plant of the Incas that crops plentifully.

Sometimes known as one of the 'lost crops of the Incas', achocha has been rediscovered in recent years through the efforts of heritage seed suppliers and an army of dedicated kitchen gardeners.

There are two species known as achocha. *Cyclanthera pedata*, also known as 'Lady's Slipper', is available from the Heritage Seed Library in the UK. Botanically speaking, its distinguishing features include smooth-skinned fruits that grow in pairs. The second species, *Cyclanthera brachystachya*, is known as 'Fat Baby'. It grows single fruits with

soft, fleshy spines.

From a gardener's point-of-view, the two species are identical. Members of the Cucurbitaceae family, achocha species are related to squashes and cucumbers. Known to grow at altitudes of up to 2,000m (6,500ft) in South America, they enjoy warmth but will crop quite happily outside in a sheltered spot in the UK.

Achocha is a tender annual. Seeds can be sown outside once the risk of frost has passed, or sown indoors and later transplanted to their growing position. They are vigorous climbing

Above left to right:
1) Lady's Slipper and Achocha pizza.
2) Exploding cucumber plant.
3) Spiky exploding cucumber.

Achocha has prompted a great deal of experimental cookery – recipes suggest they are good as a pizza topping, and anywhere you would use green peppers or in pickles and chutneys. If you keep picking the fruit, the plants will continue to produce more, so you will have plenty of fruits to develop your own recipes with!

Achocha won't cross with other plants in the garden, so saving seed is easy. The seeds are hard, black and oddly shaped – easy to extract from ripe fruits.

Another of achocha's relatives is

Right top to bottom:
1) Achocha Fat Baby.
2) Exploded cucumber.
3) Fat Baby cucumbers.

SUPPLIERS
Members of the Heritage Seed Library can obtain achocha 'Lady's Slipper' from their catalogue.

Real Seeds supply seeds for achocha 'Fat baby' and exploding cucumbers. The Real Seed Catalogue
Brithdir Mawr Farm, Newport
Pembrokeshire SA42 0QJ
www.realseeds.co.uk

Emma Cooper is the voice of the Alternative Kitchen Garden podcast: <http://akg.btpodshow.com>

