

How to grow cucumbers

Source: Peter Kearney

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When you have eaten a cucumber straight from the vine in your organic vegetable garden as a sweet fruit, you will know how beautiful organically grown cucumbers taste. This article teaches you how to grow your own great tasting cucumbers. You can also find a lot of additional information on cucumbers in our web site paid member area at www.cityfoodgrowers.com.

Step 1. Prepare your soil

Cucumbers prefer a relatively neutral soil ph of 6.5-7, so check this before you plant and adjust your ph accordingly. Cucumbers will grow in many soil types. Its very important that the soil used should absorb and retain water effectively and drain well. Cucumbers are water hungry plants when fruiting, but they are also very subject to mould so they need good water levels but not so much to water-log them.

To prepare the bed, loosen the soil to 6-8 inches (15-18cm) depth. Break up any large clods and avoid walking on the soil. You can then add organic matter such as very well rotted manure, compost, leaf mould (not eucalypt). Make sure you do this preparation up to two weeks before planting. One of the best ways to ensure your soil is OK for cucumbers is to practice crop rotation.

Step 2. Choose your plants

Put in about six to nine plants per person and stagger the planting so you have a continuous crop over a long period. The space you use is very dependant on your planting method, ie if you trellis the plants, you can get more production for the space whereas growing them on the ground takes up a lot of space and makes staggered planting more difficult if you have limited space.

There are many varieites of cucumbers to choose from and its important that you choose varieties that are suitable for your taste preference. Varieties are listed on our plant database in our web site paid member area at www.cityfoodgrowers.com.

Most varieties of cucumbers are monoecious - they produce female and male flowers and rely on bees to do the pollinating. Some varieities are gynoecious and only produce female flowers that pollinate without the need for male flowers. The gynoecious varieties will fruit early but generally not sustain production, so its best to have a mixture of monoecious and gynoecieous varieites.

Step 3. Follow correct planting methods

Cucumbers are a warm season crop needing a full sun position with up to 8 hours of sunlight per day. They are very subject to frost at either end of the planting season. If you want early or late crops then make sure you protect the plants from extreme cold. Paid members of our web site at www.cityfoodgrowers.com can use the localised planting calendar to find out ideal planting months and extreme cold months for growing cucumbers for any location in Australia, USA and New Zealand.

Its best to plant cucumbers seeds directly into your garden, as their fragile root systems can be damaged with transplanting. However if you do use seedlings, be very careful with planting. Cucumber seeds are quite large and easy to handle so planting depth should be at least 1.5 times the diameter of the seed. Make sure you plant the seeds or seedlings in your garden bed in a large ball of compost.

Cucumbers can be grown along the ground or on climbing frames. My preference is on climbing frames as you get more yield for the growing space and you then don't need to place too much water on the leaves which can easily succumb to mould. I use chicken wire as a climbing frame and often its good to put this in a long rap over dome so the cucumbers climb over it and the fruit hang down and are shaded from the hot sun by the vine leaves. Make sure you put in the climbing frame before you plant, so as not to disturb plant roots.

Do not keep growing cucumbers in the same bed each season, as this will deplete the soil and increase the potential for soil borne diseases and pests that love cucumbers, especially mould spores. It's good to have cucumbers after flowering crops and there are many companions and beneficial flowers to plant with cucumbers to assist with pest and disease resistance as well as enhancing fertility. If you are a paid member of our web site at www.cityfoodgrowers.com, you can access crop rotation and companion planting information for cucumbers.

Step 4. Use these growing guidelines

Keep the soil around your young cucumber plants moist. Feed the cucumbers regularly with liquid fertiliser (such as seaweed and fish emulsion or compost teas), especially if you have very hot conditions and your soil humus levels are not optimum.

The water levels required by cucumbers change greatly over their duration. When they reach fruiting stage, the water levels should be more than double of the pre-fruiting stage, otherwise the fruits will be stunted and bitter

In the warm season, mulch the soil around the base of the plants to hold in soil moisture. By having your cucumber crop raised on a climbing frame you can also keep weeds under control quite easily.

Step 5. Control for pests and diseases

Maintaining a healthy soil is always the best protection against pests and diseases, so this is rule number one. Our web site paid member area at www.cityfoodgrowers.com has extensive instructional content on organic and biosynamic soil fertility practices for your vegetable and herb garden.

With cucumbers, mould is often a problem where moisture levels are too high. You can minimise this problem by not watering on the leaves, not creating waterlogged roots, keeping mulch away from the base of the plant, not using mulch which has mould in it, such as spoiled loosen and not planting other curcubits such as melons next to cucumbers. When mould strikes, make sure you pick off the leaves and remove them from your garden and spray the plant with a dluted milk mixture or equisetum concentrate.

The cucumber beetle is a common visitor to cucumber vines and they spread bacteria on the plant. They cause the plant wilt and eventually die. Extensive information on organic treatment of cucumber diseases and pests is provided in our web site paid member area at www.cityfoodgrowers.com as well as rotation, companion planting and beneficial flower information.

Happy gardening

Peter Kearney - www.cityfoodgrowers.com

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