

The Alternative Kitchen Garden Show
Script for episode 127 - Unsown Treasures 2
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Hello and welcome to episode 127 of the Alternative Kitchen Garden Show. I'm Emma and although we're well into November now, autumn has been mild here in the UK and I'm still waiting for a significant frost in the garden even though it has been cold enough to kill off all of the very tender plants.

I have been clearing up, and am planning to make some changes in the garden layout for next year, and I have once again been delving into the depths of my over-stuffed seed box to pull out some of the Unsown Treasures - seeds I had forgotten I had and that will make interesting additions to the garden next spring.

A while ago, when I asked for suggestions for topics for the show (which you're welcome to submit at any time), a listener suggested a show on spices. At the time it wasn't one of the areas I knew much about, so it is still sitting on the list, but I have been investigating the murky world of the difference between herbs and spices.

There may be significant cultural differences in the use of the word spice, but if you'd asked me what I thought the differences were before I started my research then I would have said that although both herbs and spices are pungent or aromatic plants used to flavour food, herbs are leaves and stems, and spices are other parts of the plant (e.g. roots, flowers, fruit and bark).

A different explanation I have come across is that herbs grow in temperate climates, and spices come from the tropics - although I would say there are some clear exceptions to this rule, for example coriander from which the leaves are used as a herb (known as cilantro in the States) and the seeds are used as a spice. But then it's possible to have seeds as a third category in their own right. I did say the waters were murky!

Botanically speaking, herbs (herbaceous plants) are non-woody, flowering plants, many of which die back over the winter although they may be perennial.

And there's another layer of confusion added because we tend to use the word 'spicy' to describe food that is 'hot' - contains chilli and has a spicy kick. And both herbs and spices are used medicinally as well as for their culinary properties (and there are herbs that are only used medicinally).

And then there's condiments, which tend to be mixtures and blends of herbs and spices, or processed seasonings (e.g. pickled capers).

I'd be interested to hear your thoughts on the subject, but in the meantime here are some of the Unsown Treasures hanging out in the herbs and spices section of my seed box, which I hope to be able to sow next year.

1) Firstly there is dill (or dill weed), a common garden herb that I have never grown. Dill is *Anethum graveolens*, an annual member of the same plant family as parsley. I don't remember eating much dill in the past, but this year I have been having it with fish and am now a dill convert. It's also used in cheese dishes, and sauces, and of course the classic American dill pickles.

Apparently we have the Romans to thank for spreading dill around Europe, and its use is widespread in Russian, German and Scandinavian cooking.

Dill seeds are sown in spring. Here in the UK that's outdoors from April to June, or inside in pots in February and March for planting outside once the risk of frost has passed. Germination can take up to 4 weeks, and plants can reach up to 90 cm tall, and need to be spaced about 30 cm apart. Leaves are ready for harvest in late spring and throughout the summer. If you want the seeds you have to wait until autumn for your harvest.

In UK seed catalogues it's unusual to see different varieties of dill - people just grow the species - but they are available if you want to track them down. Suffolk Herbs, for example (<http://www.suffolkherbs.com/>) offer 'Fernleaf' which produces dwarf plants that are slow to bolt and is good for leaf production, and 'Mammoth' which produces very little leaf and runs to seed quickly for seed production.

2) Second on the list is cumin, *Cuminum cyminum*, which can be a little tricky to grow in the UK because it needs a long growing season for the seeds to ripen. The seeds are used a lot in Indian cooking, and also in Mexican food as cumin was introduced to South America by Spanish colonists.

Cumin is another annual plant in the parsley family, and my cumin potatoes (<http://emmacooper.org/blog/low-salt-entertaining>) always go down well in this house! The recipe is on the blog so I will put the link in the show notes for you.

Seeds are sown outside in spring (April and May here in the UK) once the soil starts to warm up, and are thinned to around 30 cm apart, although close planting apparently helps the plants to support each other when the heavy seed heads develop. That should be in August and September, but depending on the weather you may well need to cut the plants down and bring them indoors to dry the seed properly.

I haven't seen any varieties of cumin on offer, but it's worth mentioning that *Nigella sativa* is sometimes known as Black Cumin, although it is a completely different herb. And, apparently, *Nigella sativa* isn't even the original Black Cumin (which comes from Morocco and is *Carum bulbocastanum*), but is widely used as a substitute because real Black Cumin is hard to come by.

3) Number three is far less confusing, because it is Mitsuba, or Japanese parsley: *Cryptotaenia japonica*. According to Suffolk Herbs, mitsuba is a perennial plant, and all parts of the plant are edible. The leaves are most commonly used, and have a flavour that's a cross between regular parsley and celery. Leaves are used in salads, and can also be lightly cooked - add them near the end to avoid over-cooking them and spoiling their flavour.

Mitsuba is another member of the Umbellifer family, and indeed that family is crammed full of tasty herbs as well as the odd vegetable (carrots and parsnips) and some beautiful ornamental plants. They're not all benign, though, as there are poisonous relatives and many members can also be irritating to the skin, although it depends a little bit on your sensitivity which ones will cause you problems. Anyway, that just highlights the importance of correctly identifying plants before you tuck in!

If you're growing your own Mitsuba you won't have any problems, and seeds are sown in spring and thinned to 30 cm apart. Like parsley, seeds can be slow to germinate and

you may want to use radishes or another quick crop to mark the row while you wait. You can also sow mitsuba seeds in August to overwinter for spring use.

- 4) Number four is another oriental herb, perilla or shiso. I have two varieties in my seed box, both of which came from seed swaps - a green-leaved version and a red one. The scientific name is *Perilla frutescens*, and these plants are in the mint family. Perilla is a very attractive plant, and wouldn't look out of place in your flower borders, particularly the red version which is used to colour food as well as add flavour.

According to PFAF (<http://pfaf.org/user/Plant.aspx?LatinName=Perilla+frutescens>), the leaves, flowers and seeds of perilla are all used as flavourings. And if, like me, you love the PFAF website then you may want to consider contributing to their current campaign to raise money to cover their running costs and the implementation of the new features they want to add. I'll put a link to that in the show notes for you; even a couple of pounds, dollars or euros will help them on their way to their target.

Perilla is traditionally used in Japan for tempura and sushi, soups and salads. The red version is used to make rather stunning pickles.

Seeds are sown in spring, with earlier sowings under cover and later ones direct. Plants need to be thinned to 30 cm apart, and can be grown in pots and transplanted. Plants need to be grown in a sunny spot, and of all the herbs I am going to mention today, I suspect that mitsuba is the only one that would cope with any degree of shade.

- 5) And the final seed sample I am unearthing today is cinnamon basil. In fact, this is a little bit of a cheat since it's a new packet - but there was an old packet languishing in the box earlier in the year. It's just that when I found it I managed to spill all the seeds on the floor and so I had to buy replacements!

Now cinnamon basil is a cultivar of sweet basil *Ocimum basilicum*, and originates from Mexico. It contains the same chemical that gives cinnamon its flavour, and is thus popular for use in drinks and with fruit. Basils are perennial plants in the mint family, but they're all tender and so are usually grown as annuals in temperate climates. Some are more tender than others, in fact, so check the temperature requirements for the varieties you grow to avoid any disappointing results.

The nice thing about basils is they they're generally happy in pots on the window sill, so you can bring them indoors for winter supplies. You can also sprout seeds and use the seedlings, if you have a plentiful supply of seeds.

Basil seeds are normally sown indoors in spring, for planting outside (if appropriate) once the risk of frost has passed. Cinnamon basil can grow to around 45 cm tall, and plants need to be 20 cm apart.

Cinnamon basil is one of the seeds that has been sent into space as part of the aptly named SEEDS in Space project! (<http://parkseed.com/article.aspx?a=13>). They flew on Endeavour in 2007, and were then distributed to schools for growth experiments.

I suspect if I sow these seeds next year then I will be in danger of developing Basil Fever - the sheer number of different basil varieties on offer makes it very tempting for gardeners to try and collect, and grow, them all!

That's it from me for today, but if you'd like to weigh in on the Herbs vs Spices debate, or you have a favourite herb you love to grow in the garden, or new ones to try next year, then you can send me an email to akgpodcast@gmail.com, leave a comment on the show home page or come and find me on Facebook and Twitter.

Goodbye!