

The Alternative Kitchen Garden Show - episode 129 script

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"Hello, and welcome to episode 129 of the Alternative Kitchen Garden show, the first episode of 2012. Happy new year! And as we've just passed the Chinese new year and entered the year of the Dragon, I thought I would continue with my Unsown Treasures series and show you some of the oriental vegetables languishing unopened in my seed box.

Soy beans

Firstly I have a packet of soya (or soy) beans from Jungle Seeds - the variety name is given as 'edamame', which is the oriental name for a dish of soy beans cooked in their pods. They're usually served that was as a salty bar snack, with the beans being de-podded by the patrons. My husband is a big fan of edamame, but this isn't the first packet of soy bean seeds I have bought. A few years ago I had a packet of a variety called 'Ustie' from Thompson & Morgan and couldn't get a single seed to germinate - I even tried sprouting them in a jar with no success. T&M have a different variety on offer now, called 'Elena', which I haven't tried.

According to the instructions on my Jungle Seeds packet, soy beans tend to rot in damp soil, which may explain some of the germination problems (I know I wasn't the only gardener to experience them). If I manage to successfully germinate them it sounds as though they're a candidate for the Grow Dome, as they require heat and full sun to grow well.

Soy beans are a new and unusual crop here in the UK and I haven't come across anyone who has successfully grown them. But I know they are more common in other parts of the world, so if you've grown them feel free to send in your hints, tips and experiences and get me off to a flying start. The only other advice is that they should be grown like dwarf beans, in rows.

Although the winter weather has been mild here in the UK this year, harsher conditions are predicted for February and it's far too early to start something as tender as soy beans, even indoors. So my edamame have to go back into the seed box for now.

Radish

Back in 2009 I was featured in a BBC Radio 4 programme for children, called GoFort! It involved me travelling into London to meet a small group of children from a school that actively encourages gardening and has its own allotment. It was a fun day, and the kids were great. One particularly memorable moment involved the presenter being given a very muddy radish to nibble, which he bravely did. I can't remember what he said, but when he asked one of the boys whether he liked radishes, he got the robust answer "No, they taste like dirty socks!".

I tend to agree, although I know a lot of people who enjoy them. Radishes are often grown by young and novice gardeners, because they rush through their lifespan and provide what - in gardening terms - is almost instant gratification. They can also grow pretty much anywhere, although I'm talking about the small salad radishes here rather than the long-rooted winter radishes and the giant oriental versions.

The next packet of seeds I have pulled out of my seed box is a packet of a heritage variety - the Rat's Tail radish. It's an interesting one because it is grown not for its roots, but for the edible seed pods. When they flower, radish plants shoot up and send out willowy stems and the flowers are followed by green seed pods that look like a cross between pea pods and wizened witches' fingers. They are best eaten young, as they get tougher as they mature, and can be added to salads or stir-fries for a peppery punch. I have yet to try them myself, although hopefully they will be on the menu later this year.

Although the Rat's Tail variety is grown for its pods, the seed pods on all radishes are edible - they have different flavours depending on the variety and some will be more to your taste than others. So if your radishes bolt this year, don't pull them up immediately - let them flower and see whether you can get a pod crop instead of chomping your way through woody roots.

Kintsai

I have a packet of seeds from a seed swap labelled, simply, Kintsai, and I have just had to look up what that is. In fact it is Chinese celery, and according to Victoriana Nursery Gardens (a UK stockist), it is very sweet with a delicate flavour and the leaves can be used in salads or as a watercress substitute for garnishes.

Kintsai is a dwarf form of celery and can be grown in pots, which means that it is easy to take it into the greenhouse for some winter protection. The seed, which is tiny (but recognisable as a celery once you know), is sown in spring and barely covered. In good conditions you could have your first harvest in ten weeks, but it is best not to rush planting it out as cold weather can cause it to bolt.

I have never been a big fan of the traditional celery grown here in England, with its thick stalks that are eaten raw or used as a vegetable in stews. It's the stringy texture that bothers me, and it's also a difficult plant to grow. The traditional varieties need to be grown in a trench, and earthed up to produce the long stems, although there are modern self-blanching varieties that are less effort. Still, I think it's fussy about soil and water requirements.

I have a packet of leaf celery, which looks a bit more like parsley on the packet, with thin stems and lots of leaf. I was already planning on trying that this year, so it will be interesting to see how it compares to this oriental variety. Apparently the Chinese add it to stir-fries as a leafy vegetable, so I will definitely have to try that.

Apparently two sowings, one in spring and one in summer, would keep me in kintsai throughout the year.

Lettuce asparagus

Another packet of seed from a swap is my Lettuce asparagus. It carries several names, including celtuce and asparagus lettuce, and is grown for its chunky stems rather than its leaves. It wasn't until I read Joy Larkcom's *Oriental Vegetables* again that I discovered it is an Asiatic stem lettuce, although it is rarely sold as an oriental vegetable.

Again, it's a plant that I have not yet experienced, but apparently the stems are sliced and stir-fried as a mild but crunchy vegetable. The leaves are also edible, either as a salad lettuce or a cooked green. It's certainly an uncommon vegetable, and I have never seen it

for sale although you might pick it up at a farmer's market. When I was doing the research for this show I came across a fantastic recipe for it that would appeal to the gourmet, which is a stem lettuce take on a Caesar salad and would make a very impressive dinner party starter - I'll put the link in the show notes for you (http://blog.ideasinfood.com/ideas_in_food/2011/06/stem-lettuce-caesar.html).

Chopsuey Greens

You may find that chopsuey greens, Shungiku, have been hiding out in your flower bed as *Chrysanthemum coronarium* is often grown as an ornamental plant. It has its origins in the Mediterranean, but is well-known and loved as an edible plant in the far east. It is the highly aromatic foliage that is eaten, either like a spinach or stir-fried, but only lightly cooked.

The flowers are edible, too, but apparently only the petals as the middles are too bitter and should be removed. But this isn't the *Chrysanthemum* used for Chrysanthemum tea (<http://emmacooper.org/blog/chrysanthemum-tea>) so you may prefer to leave any flowers to brighten up the garden and feed the insects.

Chiltern Seeds recommend successional sowings from spring onwards, but there is some suggestion that plants will bolt in hot weather, so you may need to factor in a summer break.

Aubergines

There are two packets of aubergine seed in my seed box. It is a vegetable I have only grown once, as neither I nor my husband like eating them. I grew the F1 variety Calliope, which grows stripy purple, egg-shaped fruits on sturdy plants. They are stunning - with furry leaves and big lilac flowers, followed by the stripy fruit, they would find a place in any ornamental garden. They do tend to be a little spiny though, so you do have to be careful of your fingers.

The Szechuan aubergine is a different thing entirely. It's a heritage seed, and I chose it based on a picture I have seen on the fruit - which are a glorious aubergine deep purple colour, but are long and finger-shaped. They seem to ripen from green to purple, as in an intermediate stage they are a stunning mixture of both.

This variety was brought to the UK by Joy Larkcom herself, who collected it during a trip to Chendgu in 1994. It looks as though it should crop well even in a poor summer, and that the fruits do not go bitter. Whether it will prove to be more popular in our kitchen than its fatter cousins remains to be seen.

The second aubergine is the Thai Green pea, and is very different again. Seeds are hard to come by in the UK, as is the mature fruit - so Thai cooking aficionados have to grow their own for an authentic experience. My packet came from a seed swap. It seems that the plants themselves can grow quite large, in contrast to the fruit which are tiny - hence the name. They should be prolifically borne, though, and the idea is to pick them when they're young and have just reached their full size, and to add them whole to Thai dishes. If you leave them until they are fully ripe then they may be seedy and too bitter. If you're faced with a glut then the Vietnamese like to pickle them.

Kiwi

The final unsown treasure for today is a packet of kiwi seeds - this is *Actinidia chinensis* and I bought the seeds on my last trip to the Eden project but have never got around to sowing them. Kiwis are more commonly bought as plants in the UK, and I have three myself. Two are the self-fertile variety of *A. chinensis*, 'Jenny' and 'Issai' is a self-fertile variety of the hardy kiwi *A. arguta* which is also known as the cocktail kiwi because its fruits are smaller and hairless and can be eaten whole.

None of those plants has fruited yet, but that's partly my fault as I have been growing them in containers. They should all be given a permanent home in the ground in the great redesign of 2012 which is ongoing.

If you want to grow kiwis from seed then the important thing to note is that the resulting seedlings will be either male or female, and you will need both to produce a fruit crop. I am not sure how long it would be before you could differentiate between the sexes, but once you do you only need one male plant to pollinate several females, so as long as you have a largish garden it shouldn't be a problem. In smaller gardens it is best to stick to the self-fertile versions.

It's a little bit early for much seed sowing here in the UK, although that hasn't stopped some intrepid gardeners from giving in to their itchy green fingers. Don't forget that tender plants sown now can't go outside until the risk of frost has passed, and will need to be coddled on the windowsill, or in the greenhouse, until then and often suffer from lack of light. A better option might be to get involved with the 52 Week Salad Challenge on the Veg Plotting blog (link in the show notes, <http://vegplotting.blogspot.com/2012/01/52-week-salad-challenge-begins.html>) which aims to get us all eating at least some of our own salad leaves every week for a year.

The challenge is in its early stages, but has generated a considerable amount of interest and got people starting seeds for leafy veg, and sprouting seeds indoors, so that they can have homegrown salads in these dark days of winter.

In keeping with today's theme I am going to offer some tips from Joy Larkcom, who first brought many of the oriental leafy greens to the attention of the British public, and coined the term 'saladini' for the mixtures of salad plants she grew.

You can now buy various seed mixes for salads, whether they are marketed as saladini or not, but of course if you have lots of packets of seed cluttering up your seed box then you can easily make your own - and this is a good way of using up older seed, where it doesn't matter if you don't get top notch germination rates.

Joy recommends mixing by weight or volume, and shaking the seeds together in a bag before sowing. You should do this with commercial mixes, too, as different-sized seeds tend to clump together and merely tipping a pinch of seeds out of the packet without shaking won't give you a good mixture of plants. You can easily measure out small volumes of seed with a teaspoon; for larger amounts sensitive scales will help.

Joy's basic 'recipe' is equal volumes of pak choi, mizuna, komatsuna and one of the Chinese cabbage varieties that doesn't form a head. You can of course add in your own favourites - red lettuce adds a spot of colour and spinach is nice for baby leaves. A mixture where all of the seeds germinate in a similar time frame is useful, but not essential. You may want to develop your own mixes for early or late in the season, for salads or for stir-fry vegetables.

And if, later in the season, you discover that all of your oriental brassicas have bolted, then don't despair. Many of the flowering shoots are very tasty when eaten like broccoli, and you can always collect your own seed for sprouting (where it doesn't matter if your varieties have crossed). Carl Legge offered some other useful hints and recipes on the blog as part of my September Write Club, and I will add a link to that in the show notes for you (<http://emmacooper.org/blog/write-club-how-pandas-helped-me-appreciate-brassicas>).

That's it from me for today. I am hard at work on my latest book, which is called IncrEdibles, and you can find more information about that on the website (<http://emmacooper.org/plant-hunters-incredibles>). Hopefully I will have finished the manuscript before spring and will be able to spend plenty of time in the garden this year. IncrEdibles will be a work-in-progress in the Potting Shed for a while longer, but in the meantime we're working on an ebook version of The Peat-Free Diet (<http://emmacooper.org/peat-free-diet>) and I will let you know when that's going to be published as soon as I know!

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