

Asian Vegetables

We are lucky in the Pacific Northwest to have neighbors who trace their families back to Asia within the last generation or two. Many have retained their traditional foods, which we can sample at local ethnic restaurants. If we want to try cooking an Asian-style dish for ourselves, our grocery stores carry all the necessary ingredients. The trouble is, if you decide you like baby pak choy and snow peas, you could go broke before you eat your fill. Like any specialty produce, Asian vegetables are pricey. Fortunately, many are easy to grow. Here are a few Asian vegetables you might try.

Yard-long Beans or Asparagus Beans

These can be grown in our area, but we really don't get enough heat to do a very good job. They resent our cool night temperatures. By trial and error, we have discovered that you should pick your sunniest spot, make a raised bed, and plant the seed when the soil has warmed (transplants go into shock). Cover the bed for the first several weeks with a clear plastic row cover and pray for a warm summer. With luck, you will get a nice crop of tasty beans, pencil-thin but about 14-18" long. These "beans" are closely related to black-eyed peas and only distantly related to regular green beans.

Bottle Gourd

This is a vegetable favorite of many Lao gardeners. Yes, it is the gourd out of which you might make a birdhouse. The fruit should be harvested while still young and tender. It is peeled, cut into pieces, and then steamed or stir-fried. The shoots (vine ends) are also used as a green vegetable. Area Lao gardeners wash them, steam them (to blanch) and then freeze them for winter eating. Like many squashes, they take time to get going, so transplants are recommended.

Thai Hot Pepper

These are among the hottest peppers we can grow here. They need to be started indoors in about February and then transplanted out in early June. Clear plastic covers to build up heat are important to get them really growing.

Asian Eggplant

These are long, skinny or small, egg-shaped versions of the familiar vegetable. They are heat-lovers, too, and good companions for peppers under a plastic row cover. They can be added to stir-fries without peeling or seeding and cook up very fast.

Cucumbers

Oriental-type cukes are long, slender, and have small seeds. If they are kept mulched and well watered, they seldom get bitter. Trellising will help you produce nice, straight fruit.

Snow or Chinese Peas

These are the flat pods, not the newer snap peas. They are easy to grow and amazingly productive. 'Oregon Sugar Pod II' is an excellent, virus-resistant variety for our area.

Chinese Parsley (Cilantro)

This herb can be sown from spring through fall. Late-seeded crops will over-winter and produce an exceptionally early crop next year.

Chinese Chives

This perennial is another that can be sown just about any time. The flat leaves and the flowers are both used for a mild, slightly garlicky flavor in many dishes. They are easy to grow and very ornamental.

Amaranth

This leafy vegetable was cultivated by ancient American peoples as well as people on other continents. With such a long history, it's no wonder there are many kinds. The names tampala and Chinese spinach are also used for leaf amaranth. There are also grain amaranths (produce edible seed), ornamental amaranths (such as 'Joseph's Coat') and weed amaranths (such as pigweed). All of these are edible, though not as tasty. Very young leaves and stems can be used in salads. Older plants are slightly stronger flavored and not as tender and are used like spinach or in soups.

Malabar or Climbing Spinach or Basella

This green leafy vegetable is very popular in many Asian countries but requires more summer heat than we get in Seattle. We do well with so many other greens that it would seem a waste to devote your hottest spot to this crop. It is a versatile vegetable with a mucilaginous quality similar to okra.

Garland Chrysanthemum or Chop Suey Greens

This yellow daisy is tasty, nutritious, easy-to-grow, and very pretty if allowed to flower. Tender young leaves are used in a wide variety of ways but are usually steamed or stir-fried or used raw in salads. As the plants get older, the flavor gets stronger and more bitter. At this point, the flower petals can be eaten.

Pak Choy (also spelled "Bok" and "Choi")

This non-heading, mild mustard can have smooth or crinkled leaves on broad, white or green stems. The most common kind looks a little like Swiss chard. It can be planted by seeds or transplants. In Seattle, we can get two crops of pak choy per year. Plant the early crop in March and the late one in August.

Yiu Choy

Again, this is a perfect crop for our Northwest climate, since it is difficult to grow in hot weather. Plants are ready for harvest when the flower stalk is present but still green (no yellow flowers open). Use stems, leaves, and flowers. All are sweet and delicious.

Chinese or Napa Cabbage

These are head-forming, succulent, mild cabbage-like vegetables. 'Spring A-I' is the variety we recommended for spring planting, and 'China King' is good for fall (sow mid-July to mid-August). 'Michilli' and 'Wong Bok' don't seem to work as well here. Generally, fall crops are the most successful.

Chinese Mustard Greens or Gai Choy

This is a must-have crop for most Asian gardeners. They love the fact that it can be grown all year 'round in Seattle. Our summers seldom get too hot or our winters too cold for mustard greens. It is a fast crop and one of the most nutritious you can grow. It has a stronger taste than the greens named above.

Chinese Broccoli or Kalia

This is another plant-it-early-or plant-it-late crop. Here, however, we recommend you do it as a spring crop. Early plantings develop a big, healthy root system that allows you to harvest the plant repeatedly through the summer. At each cutting, you take the broccoli-like stalks and adjoining leaves. Let it regrow and keep picking until the plant's energy runs out.

Radishes

We've all tried the little, round, red ones, but the Asian cultivars come in a variety of shapes and colors. Many, including daikon, are meant to be planted in August for fall and winter eating. All parts of the radishes are edible (including the pointy seedpods) and may be eaten raw, cooked or pickled.