



## A Cucumber Discovery

Kevin Milaeger

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**Most evenings I can usually be found at home** in the kitchen, chopping away at vegetables for our nightly salad. I usually try to keep it interesting by using at least ten ingredients. In the warm months most everything comes directly from the garden, but in the winter everything comes from the grocery store. (Here I will resist the urge to comment on store bought vegetables, focusing on something positive.) Cucumbers have always been a favorite vegetable of mine, but at this time of year I usually avoid them. It's not that they taste all that bad. The problem is that I use only a small portion of a cucumber at a time, so one cuke should last for three or four evenings, but it doesn't. By the last or second to last evening, it looks questionable and so is relegated to the compost pile. I was therefore delighted to discover "mini cukes." I suppose these have been around for years, but somehow I overlooked them. They are four or five inches long and about an inch wide. At the grocery stores I frequent, these are packed six to a package. Now I just use one mini cuke for our salads; the cucumber freshness problem has been solved.



store purchased Cukes



Silor Mini

Of course the next step is to grow some of these mini cukes in my own garden. A cucumber picked fresh from the vine, at the perfect stage of ripeness, has a flavor not to be found at a grocery store, and probably not even at a farmer's market. Crisp is the adjective that comes to mind---remarkable for a vegetable that is about 96% water. If cucumbers have a fault it is their nominal nutritional value. They are grown mostly for their flavor and their ability to counter spicy foods. The mini cukes that I buy at the grocery

store come from two growers. I checked their websites but they don't give the variety names---a corporate secret, I guess. But I don't mind experimenting---that is a big part of gardening, after all. I reviewed the cucumber offerings of numerous seed companies, and it looks like I will try at least several different types. The seed for many of



Sugar Crunch



Picolino

these cukes is very costly; often over 50 cents per seed (many standard cuke seeds are less than 5 cents each.) The main reason for the high seed cost for some of these varieties is that they are parthenocarpic seeds. That means that they will produce plants that have only female flowers, and those flowers are self-pollinating. Standard cukes have both male and female

flowers. Of course the male flowers don't produce fruit, and most of the early flowers on standard cukes tend to be male. As a result, parthenocarpic plants produce more fruit than standard plants. Some of the cuke varieties on my short list are 'Silor Mini,' 'Sugar Crunch,' 'Picolino,' 'Rocky,' and 'Iznik.' This will be the first time I have grown any of



Rocky



Iznik

these cukes have a very thin, smooth skin so there is no need for peeling. They are burpless, which means they have few, if any, seeds. They are disease resistant, and some have been bred to have a compact habit so they are great for smaller gardens, or maybe even container growing. Note: none of these cucumbers are genetically modified organisms (GMOs.)

Because of the high seed cost, we at Milaeger's will have to figure out a new way to offer these plants at our greenhouse---they'll have to sell for considerably more than traditional cukes. I want to have some plants to offer at our "Vintage Veggies" event in mid-May---more about that event in a future blog. Maybe we should set up at a specialty cuke tasting table at Tomatomania to create interest. I'll give that some thought....

Here's something to remember when growing any type of cucumber. I always try to learn where a plant originated before I grow it for the first time. This will give some clues about the plants preferences. Cucumbers are subtropical in origin---they are believed to be native to east India, and they have been cultivated for over 4,000 years. Being subtropical, they like it warm. Many Wisconsin gardeners are overly zealous, and plant them way too early. I wouldn't think of putting them out before early June, and even then I only plant if the 10 day forecast is favorable. Cucumber plants require a night temperature of at least 55 degrees. (Note that I said "require," not "prefer.") If you must plant them early, plant them in a large pot so they can put on some growth, and move them indoors if night temperatures are threatening. Plant them permanently outdoors only when you are sure it is safe.

All types of cucumbers taste best if picked when they are less than fully grown. In times past this was because they quickly became bitter, especially at the stem end, if grown too large. This "bitterness" characteristic has largely been bred out of modern cucumber varieties, but they still taste best when picked young. The unpleasant experience of biting into "the bitter end" is one you want to avoid...and yes, that is where the expression "the bitter end" comes from.