



Kevin Milaeger

Milaeger's

Cukes Now! Tomatoes for the Fourth?

My first cucumber of the season was picked over two weeks ago, and since then I've picked more than a dozen—and I only have two plants! It's fun to pick something in the garden and immediately bite into it. Most standard cucumbers start the season by producing lots of male flowers, which won't produce fruit. (Squash, melons, and pumpkins do the same thing.) Later, female flowers are produced (they have small fruits—actually ovaries—behind the flower, so they're easy to differentiate), and hopefully the pollen from the male finds its way to the female flowers.

Some cucumber varieties are parthenocarpic. That is, they produce only female flowers, so you get much more fruit, and earlier too. These varieties are not genetically modified. The seeds are much more expensive than other cukes. One seed company sells them for sixty-nine cents per



Mini Munch vine



flower with fruit (ovary)

seed. It doesn't seem that long ago when you could get a packet of seeds for ten cents. Nevertheless, I prefer the parthenocarpic types. They are particularly good if you only have a small garden area and need to maximize production. I'm growing a variety called 'Mini Munch.' It's ideal picking size is three to four inches, and it's marketed as a "snacking cuke." The skin is smooth and thin, so no peeling is required. I like the small size because I use one cuke in a

salad, and there is no waste. Did you ever find half of an old cuke in a baggie at the back of your refrigerator? Yuk. That doesn't happen with 'Mini Munch.'

Cucumbers are made up mostly of water—about 96%. This is why it's so important to keep them well watered after the flowers have been successfully pollinated. If you don't, the fruit can become irregular and distorted, and the taste isn't quite right either. (The same is true of radishes. Not enough water will make them pithy and hot.) In recent weeks, since about the time I planted my cucumbers, it has been unusually dry here. My plants have been faithfully watered, so all is well. Cucumbers must have heat. They originated in India and Southeast Asia, after all. I always recommend planting them after



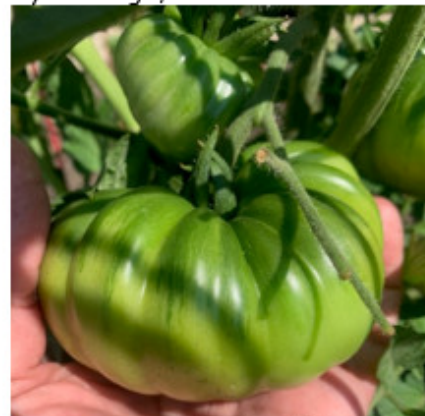
Mini Munch



blossom end rot (BER)

June first. But even then, cold related problems can still occur. Such was the case this year. Around mid-June, on one fine day, we took all of our remaining cukes out of the greenhouse and set them outside, just like we do every year at that time. That night the temperature dipped into the high forties—not even all that cold—and the next day the cukes had turned white. A few still had a couple green leaves, and I was hopeful, but they all died. The plants had gone from a continual climate of eighty plus degrees, to a night temperature in the high forties, and it was too much of a shock. A customer sent me photos of her cukes that had done the same thing. And the same thing happened in my own garden about five years ago, so I should have known better. This year, my personal plants had been in the garden for over a week by the time that cold night struck, so they were well acclimated. At the greenhouse, we also had a large batch of basil outdoors, but they had been out for over a week, and so could tolerate the coolth. Normally, basil is one of the most tender, frost-sensitive plants there is. So, even basil can be acclimated, or "hardened off."

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Grandma's Pick

This is the first year that I can recall having no blossom end rot on my tomatoes. That's the disease where the bottom of the tomato fruit has a dark leathery patch, and is inedible. The



disease begins at the time of fruit formation, so it can be detected early, even when the fruit is tiny. I check for it as soon as the fruit forms, and pick and discard any that I find. The plant will then produce more flowers, and hopefully they will be free of the problem. I have twelve tomato plants at my place, and another twelve at the office. All are different varieties, and all have formed fruit, with no sign of BER. The disease is most common at the start of the season, so it's looking to be a good tomato season. In my garden, the fruit on 'Grandma's Pick' is the largest right now, but the first to ripen will likely be 'Bloody

Bloody Butcher

Butcher' or one of the cherry types. I've picked ripe fruit before the Fourth of July in some years, but it's not going to happen this year. I see that the next ten days will all be above eighty degrees, so it won't be long. But this year's holiday celebration won't include home grown tomatoes.