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Cucumbers, by Lawrence Davis-Hollander, ©2015

Cucumbers are one of the great summer fruits that we think of exclusively as a vegetable. We enjoy cucumbers in summertime salads, and as an accompaniment in the form of pickles and relish for hamburgers and hot dogs. Americans are more or less split on whether to eat the cucumber fresh or pickled, although the trend is clearly moving toward more fresh consumption with our contemporary focus on fresh vegetables and less salt.

Give or take, we eat just under 10 pounds of cucumbers a year — not a large amount compared to crops like tomatoes or potatoes, but enough to keep American farmers producing a couple billion pounds a year. The United States is the fourth largest cucumber producer in the world, lagging behind China, which produces more than 40 billion pounds annually.

As a cucumber grower, I eat more pickles than fresh cucumbers because [I make my own pickles](#). There's nothing better than opening a briny jar of well-cured green pickles in the dead of winter and savoring that intense salty-sour flavor with distinct accents of garlic.

Cuke Beginnings

Cucumbers were brought to the New World by the Spanish — the vegetable was supposedly cultivated in 1494 by Columbus — and they appear as early as 1539 cultivated by Native Americans in Florida. By one means or another, they were in Virginia by the late 16th or early 17th century. Not long after the arrival of the Pilgrims in 1629, if not earlier, cucumbers were being grown in Massachusetts. William Bradford, governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony, in the 1650 writing, *A Descriptive and Historical Account of New England in Verse*, mentions cucumbers as among vegetables grown in the colony's gardens.

By the 18th century, English gardeners had been raising cucumbers for three seasons. According to Phillip Miller's 1731 *Gardeners Dictionary*, cucumbers can be raised under glass in hot beds, under "hand-glasses" outdoors, and "in the common ground for a late crop, or to pickle."

In 1804, Philadelphia [seedsman](#) Bernard McMahon (or M'Mahon) published a catalog that featured eight varieties of cucumber, including Early Frame, Green Cluster and Green Roman. The Shakers' 1835 catalog from Enfield, Connecticut, listed Early Cluster, Extra Long, Long Green and Early Short Green. Vilmorin, the French seed producer, mentioned 30 varieties in 1883.

Find Heirloom Cucumbers

While modern hybrids are theoretically more resistant to common cucumber diseases like scab and mosaic, I have had few problems with diseases in [heirloom varieties](#). Rich, well-drained soil,

a long rotation cycle, consistent moisture, and proper spacing reduce stress on the plants. In wet years, which have been increasing in the Northeast, powdery mildew can be a problem.

A wide variety of heirloom cucumbers are available. If you are serious about growing an heirloom, read catalog descriptions carefully, as the heirlooms are often lumped in with modern varieties. Some of the more interesting varieties available are family heirlooms; I keep two Russian varieties going, Aunt Rita's Monastery and Spring of Water, both wonderful pickling types. Listed are cucumbers that have had a commercial release; I'll look at some of the other heirlooms in the future.

One of the most widely available pickling cucumbers is Boston Pickling. The reviews in the 1890s boasted about its vigor and yields, and that's probably why it is so widely available today. Boston Pickling yields lots of short, plump fruits about 6 inches in length, 2 inches wide and fairly straight. The fruits are dark green and make great pickles. Its exact origin is not clear, and the name was first used around 1880. It was quite popular within a decade, and had a number of synonyms, including many variants of Green Prolific. In 1901, about 100 seed companies were carrying it under the names of Boston Pickling and Green Prolific.

Early Russian is an excellent pickler introduced in the early 1850s from Russia. According to garden author Fearing Burr in 1863, "This comparatively new variety resembles, in some respects, the Early Cluster," one of the oldest kinds of cultivated cucumbers with fruits borne in clusters. The fruits are only about 4 inches long and are green with a pale yellowish-white on the blossom end with black spines. While seeds are becoming harder to find, R.H. Shumway's has a variety called Early Cluster Russian Cucumber, which appears to be correct.

White Wonder makes a pickle of a different color. These fruits are all white, actually cream with a tinge of yellow as they mature. They are about 6 inches long and 2 inches wide, with black spines. Burpee introduced them in 1893 after a customer in western New York donated seeds. The precise origin of this cucumber is unclear, and a number of white cucumbers were available by the early 17th century, including White Cucumber, Spanish (White Spanish), Long White, Short White Prickly, and White Japan listed in 1875 by James Gregory, who owned Gregory Seed Business in Massachusetts. All make a nice salad cucumber with a mild taste, as well as a wonderful pickle.

Japanese Climbing is a long slender salad cucumber about 8 to 9 inches in length, medium green with a tangy taste. While other cucumbers will climb, this one has strong tendrils making it particularly suited to trellising. Listed in James M. Thorburn & Co.'s seed catalog in 1892, it seems to have been widely circulated by 1896. The 1895 Michigan Agricultural Station report indicates this variety is good for pickles when picked at a small size.

Early Fortune is another long type. It has white spines on a dark green skin and is relatively early bearing. A good tasting salad type, it was introduced about 1910 by Jerome B. Rice Seed Co. in Cambridge, New York. One plant appeared in a field of Davis Perfect, now extinct, in Royal Oak, Michigan, and was discovered by an observant George Starr.

One of the larger heirloom salad cucumbers is Long Green Improved, which was selected two different times: in 1842 from Long Green Turkey, a variety that dates to at least 1778; and by

D.M. Ferry & Co. in 1870. Fruits are 10 to 12 inches long, dark green with some striping toward the tip end. For many years, this was the preeminent slicing and pickling cucumber.

Lemon Cucumber, as its name implies, bears a vague resemblance to a lemon, and was introduced as a novelty around 1894. They are plump ovals around 3 inches long and 2 inches wide, and are greenish-yellow to an almost lemon-yellow as they mature. The taste is mild and very pleasant. The variety has experienced a resurgence in popularity, showing up at many farmers' markets. They add to the diversity in a garden and are well worth cultivating.

If you are inclined to [save seeds](#), it's a fairly easy process, yet you'll be restricted to growing only one variety at a time unless you choose to hand pollinate.

With so many interesting cucumbers to choose from, experiment a little and you will find just the right one or two for your palate. Grow yourself a large patch, watch carefully and you just might discover the heirloom cucumber for tomorrow's gardeners.