



Background

Around the Midlands there is a wealth of expertise for growing exotic and unusual food crops held within multicultural communities. Garden Organic has already done much to preserve the seeds and the knowledge through our Sowing New Seeds project.

In our quest for growing knowledge we realised that there were some amazing stories associated with some of the foods that people were growing. Growing from your roots captured many of these stories. We wanted to preserve these memories so others can listen to them.

What were the growing conditions like in your home country?

Which crops were special to you?

How did you cook them?

What were your first impressions on arriving in this country?

What did you think of British food when you first came here?

What plants did you try growing here?

What we achieved

Recorded the stories of 20 people from x different countries including Jamaica, Uganda, India, Iraq, Romania and Pakistan.

Trained 63 people how to grow, cook and save seeds from unusual and exotic crops

Trialled 40 different unusual crops including gourds, tinda, achocha, karela and yard long beans.

Set up demonstration plots of multicultural food crops at community gardens



People

Balbir

Balbir was born in Jinia, Uganda where she lived with her family (including nine siblings!) until moving to Kampala aged seven.

Balbir's father ran a car business in Kapala, but was originally a farmer in India. It was her father who was the biggest influence on Balbir's growing, teaching her how to grow all sorts of exotic fruits, as well as how to raise chickens.

In 1965 Balbir moved to the UK and settled in the West Midlands, where she still lives today. Balbir holds an allotment which she fills with many of the different fruits and vegetables from her childhood in Uganda.



He'd plant various crops like sugar canes, bananas, yam; everything that grows in Jamaica....

Back home we use pumpkin leaves and we eat them, I don't know here whether people eat them...

The smell of the soil was so beautiful ... I just used to fancy eating it!

There is another vegetable which my aunty told me lowers blood pressure, it's called mutsine

Beauty

Beauty came from Highfields, one of the older suburbs of Harare, built in the 1930s to house black Africans under the apartheid regime of the former Rhodesia.

In her back yard she would grow all sorts of vegetables, like green vegetables, carrots, beans and some mealies.

She also remembers growing crops such as wild amaranth and white maize.

When she came to the UK, she was not impressed by the sweet potatoes in the shops that tasted watery. She wondered why people put grass in their back gardens then bought their vegetables from the supermarket.

Currently she has limited space for growing but still grows African Kale in a pot in her back yard.



Plants

Karela

Karela or bitter melon is an important plant in Asian diets. It is thought to have important health benefits especially for diabetics. Karela needs careful cooking to avoid it being too bitter – scrape out the inside and sprinkle with salt to draw out the juices. Cooked with onions, garlic and ginger, it has a delicious slightly nutty taste.

We have found that a Chinese variety of Karela, Shanghai White is very productive when grown in a glasshouse or tunnel in the UK.



African Kale

African kale comes under many names such as Covo, Rugare or Chomolia.

It is one of the easiest brassicas to grow as it grows into a 4 ft high bush that provides a supply of leaves all year round, even through the winter.

The best way to propagate it is through stem cuttings, so you need to find somebody else who is growing it. Most Zimbabwean growers on allotments will be growing it and should be happy to provide a few cuttings.

African kale is often eaten with a spicy peanut sauce.

Achocha

Achocha produces abundant pods, the size of a large chilli. They have the taste of a cucumber and the texture of a pepper. Once the last frost has passed, they will happily cover a fence and give plentiful yields. Bangladeshis often grow them as a substitute to parwal, or 'stuffing gourd'.



Food



Zacusca from Romania

The summers in Romania are hotter than ours, so a good range of Mediterranean vegetables can be grown.

Romanians have a tradition of bottling vegetables to store over the winter.

Home-made zacusca, is a Romanian vegetable paste. It's made from mainly onion, tomatoes, boiled with salt and pepper. It is often eaten with bread.

"it's very healthy and very, very good!"

Dudhi chana dal subji

This Pujabi dish uses split channa dahl and bottle gourd or dudi. Dudi is popular in curries because it keeps its firm texture well during cooking, so can be cooked long enough to absorb the flavour of the spices without disintegrating. You should be able to find it in most Asian grocers, or even better, try growing it yourself!



Further information

Recipes for these dishes, growing factsheets and audio accounts of people's stories can be found on Garden Organic's website at www.sowingnewseeds.org.uk

Contact us

If you want advice on growing unusual crops or have might have an idea for a project to work with us, we are open to ideas.

Contact: enquiry@gardenorganic.org.uk