

Growing African horned cucumber

Cucumis metuliferus

The plant

African Horned cucumber, also called jelly melon or blowfish fruit is a half-hardy annual vine, which is easy to grow. It requires warm conditions and high levels of humidity, similar to ordinary cucumbers, so is happiest growing under a cloche or in a polytunnel. The plants can climb to over 2m/6ft or over, and have hairy leaves with spines underneath, as well as a spiky stem. Male and female flowers are small and yellow, grow independently on the same plant, and do not cross-fertilise with other members of the cucumber family.

The spiny fruit are green at first, then ripen golden, and have a thick skin. They contain a greenish yellow acidic pulp, which is full of seeds, rather like passion fruit flesh, which tastes a little like cucumber and banana combined when fully ripe. Immature fruits are very sour.

Varieties and plant material

The 'Kiwanio' is a trademarked variety, which appears very similar to the type. There appear to be no other cultivars, although individual plants vary slightly in the spikiness of the fruits.

Planting and site

African horned cucumber can be difficult to germinate, and sometimes can be encouraged to sprout by exposing the seed to fluctuating temperatures between 20/30°C or by shaking the seeds in a jam jar lined with sandpaper prior to sowing to damage the seed coat. Older seed often has better germination rates than fresh.

Plants are best grown under cover, either in a greenhouse or polytunnel. Because it's prickly all over, the plant is not really suitable for growing indoors in a conservatory or porch. Wherever they are grown, they need to be in full sun. They can be grown in the soil, or a large (40cm/14in) pot, or two plants per grow bag. They do not need particularly fertile conditions, and excess nutrients will just promote leaf growth at the expense of fruit.

Like cucumbers, they need a reasonable level of warmth and humidity so plant them at the back of a glasshouse or tunnel rather than at the front near the door, which has more air circulation, so will be cooler.

The plants have separate male and female flowers, and usually male flowers are produced first. Male flowers have longer stalks and are carried in small clusters at the leaf axils, while female flowers have a small embryo fruit behind the flower, and are solitary.



Normally insects carry out pollination, but if you are growing in a confined space you may need to carry out hand pollination, by dusting the pollen from a newly opened male flower onto two or three females.

Pests, weeds and diseases

African horned cucumber is very disease and virus resistant and has been used commercially as a cucumber rootstock, although it is probably too cold sensitive to be useful for this purpose in the UK. It is unaffected by wilts and other root problems.

Like all glasshouse crops, whitefly, red spider mite and aphids can all attack plants especially those grown too warm or with high levels of nutrients which encourage luxuriant soft growth.

Harvesting and storage

Pick African horned cucumbers when they are at the desired stage of ripeness, which is usually when the fruit has turned from green to yellow. The fruit is spiky, so use thick gloves when harvesting.

When the fruit is fresh, a dark red liquid may bleed from the tips of the spines if these are damaged, so don't place the fruit anywhere it might stain. Fruits will ripen over about a week once removed from the plant and keep for around 10 days in the salad tray of the fridge.



This leaflet is produced as part of the Sowing New Seeds Project. This is funded by Big Lottery's Local Food Fund and has produced a resource of information on growing advice, experiences and seeds to promote growing of exotic produce in the UK.

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