

Growing Chinese arrowhead

Sagittaria sinensis

The plant

Chinese arrowhead, also known as white water chestnut, or chee koo is a rewarding crop to grow for people who have access to a heated growing area for at least part of the year. It needs at six months growing time to produce a worthwhile harvest, but the leaves will not stand frost. With bold dramatic foliage, and little effort needed to cultivate it, the plant is suitable for growing in a conservatory or warm office, as all you need is a large watertight container.

Chinese parents often give gifts of growing arrowhead plants around New Year to newly married couples, as they hope it will encourage the birth of grandsons.

Varieties and plant material

There are a number of different cultivars of Chinese arrowhead but none are available individually for UK growers yet. Some of the best Japanese cultivars are Aokuwai and Shirokwai, with large tubers and good yields.

Probably the best source of plant material for most people is a Chinese supermarket, although you will have no check on which variety is sold. Choose fresh, crisp plant material with a firm central spike as shown in the picture.

The tubers should be planted to half their depth in a bucket containing about 15cm/6in of sandy soil, which is low in organic matter – we used molehill soil, which was free from invertebrates – and covered with at least 20cm/4in of water. Place the bucket in a warm, bright place, at least 18°C/65°F and wait for the tubers to sprout, which is likely to take three weeks or so. Initially the tubers may float, if this happens simply prod them back into the mud at the base of the bucket.

Planting and site

Once the tubers have broken dormancy, growth is quite rapid and each tuber may need moving to a separate bucket



within six weeks or so. Warmth is important at this stage as the tender young leaves resent being chilled, so a frost-free greenhouse, sunny conservatory or bay window may be a better place for the plants than a more draughty site such as a porch or a polytunnel.

As the weather improves, if you want to try growing plants outside, start to begin hardening them off. They can be left outdoors once the night temperatures are above 10°C/50°F; this is usually in late May-early June. Choose a sheltered spot, ideally west or south facing protected from cold winds. They tend to crop better inside in cold regions such as the Midlands.

When the arrowhead plants are in their final position you might need to replot them into a larger container – we used



Chinese arrowhead tubers



Tubers sprouting



a bendy plastic tub, but have heard of other growers using all sorts of improvised watertight vessels, from a discarded bath with the plug left in to a paddling pool. Mature plants can grow to nearly 1m/3ft across and over 60cm/2ft tall.

Pests, weeds and diseases

Chinese arrowhead is free of most pests and diseases in the UK. Wild arrowhead (*Sagittaria latifolia*) is home for a range of water beetles but these are unlikely to cause damage to cultivated plants grown in isolation unless there is a pond very close by.

Harvesting and storage

As the days shorten, in October, the leaves on your arrowhead plants will begin to turn yellow and die off. Stop refilling the containers with water, and remove all leaves as they die.

Alternatively, turn containers on their sides to drain and allow the plants to die back completely while the soil around them is drying out.

It's important that dying leaves don't fall into the water and decay, because this will make the developing tubers taste and smell very unpleasant.

As soon as the leaves have died back, you can harvest the tubers – simply feel through the mud at the base of your containers and collect your crop. They will store for a few days in the fridge but quickly dry out so it's best to use them as soon as harvested. Save a couple of the larger tubers to plant next season, and store buried in 15cm/6in of soil under the same depth of water in a shed, greenhouse or polytunnel. A good crop is around 500 – 800g starting from 3 or 4 tubers.

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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