

## **COURGETTES – WAYS TO ENSURE A RELIABLE HARVEST**

### **They need plenty of water and feeding, but even a few courgettes will keep you in fruits all summer**

When you use courgettes straight after picking, you'll enjoy their delicate, but delightful flavour. So growing this veg is a must, no matter how small the garden.

Courgettes belong to the Cucurbita family and their predecessors, squashes, were grown in Mexico for at least 7000 years, according to archaeological findings. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson were apparently fans of squashes, but our modern courgettes, or small marrows, were developed near Milan in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century and only started hitting the Scottish dinner plate a few decades ago.

Seedsmen now offer a wide range of different varieties, but if you don't get round to sowing in May, most garden centres have some plants in stock. The traditional zucchini shaped fruit, which I reckon is the tastiest, is dark green, but there are lots of other shapes and colours available: tennis ball or custard pie shapes and pale green, yellow or striped fruits. Take your pick!

Courgettes are greedy and thirsty so you'll get best results by growing them in the open ground. But don't despair if you've only got a patio: it's perfectly possible to use a decent-sized container, at least a 30 litre pot. Wherever you plant them, the vital and burning question is: how many to grow? How often do we hear of gluts and surfeits? During a balmy summer, a couple of well watered and fed courgettes will supply fruits for breakfast, lunch and dinner every day of the week. On the other hand, during the dreich summer of 2008, after scouring half a dozen mean little specimens, I rejoiced when I got a handful of fruits. So your number of plants depends on how you read your crystal ball.

However many courgettes develop, it's vital to keep picking 'em small, even if you don't want to use them: give the surplus away to friends or prepare a succulent side dish for the ducks, but never end up with large, tasteless marrows which really are only fit for poultry. And close planting or using small 10 or 20 litre pots won't result in fewer vegetables - you'll have spindly, useless plants. Correct spacing really does matter. When vegetables, say cabbages, are crammed too closely together, you'll have a forest of utterly useless leaves, not the small, neat drumheads you want.

Given a half decent summer, a couple of courgette plants should suffice and four would be more than enough for most folk. Bush courgettes, especially ones that produce yellow fruits, do look good in a large patio container or at the corner of a raised bed. Plant out when the risk of frost is behind you, but still be ready to protect with a fleece or enviromesh cover, making sure it doesn't touch the leaves. The plants suffer not only from frosts and hail, but strong winds birl the big leaves and can snap the stem.

Courgettes grow best in warm soil, so spread a thin 5cm layer of compost on the bottom of the pot, and cover with a thick layer of fresh grass clippings, provided, as always, that the grass hasn't been treated with herbicides. Then fill up with general purpose compost. Make a small hole, water generously and plant. Make sure the compost is kept moist, but not wet, at all times, and to help with this, you will find a permeable membrane will make an excellent mulch as well as reducing the prospect of fungal attack. Soil-borne fungi would otherwise be splashed onto the growing fruits and those lying on wet soil could be contaminated.

In the open ground, prepare a 'hot bed', by digging out a 45cm square hole to a spit's, or spade's depth, add a 15cm layer of fresh grass clippings or fresh horse muck, cover with soil, and plant as for a container. Courgettes should be planted 90-120cm apart – they'll nearly fill that space, given half a chance!

Once you start harvesting, a weekly liquid comfrey feed will keep a plant growing well. With regular feeding and watering, courgettes will continue supplying the cook right up to the first frost, but from about the middle of September, with a sadly weakening sun, they'll become a bit watery and are best used as bulk for a ratatouille.

When small, courgettes, like most of our seedlings and young plants, feature highly on a slug's menu, so the normal precautions are essential. But otherwise, courgettes usually don't have too many problems. A wet summer, though, often causes the fruits to rot or start rotting if it's been too wet for bees or wasps to pollinate, but the variety 'Partenon' will develop good quality fruits even without being pollinated. During a hot, dry summer a different fungus will attack: powdery mildew. The familiar white, powdery coating on the leaves of lots of different veg and flowers occurs when the plant is stressed and desiccated, so can largely be prevented. Many courgette varieties have a natural greyish bloom on their leaves, this does not rub off which powdery mildew does. I like to keep the leaves moist and, during a prolonged dry spell, spray the leaves with diluted liquid seaweed for extra protection.