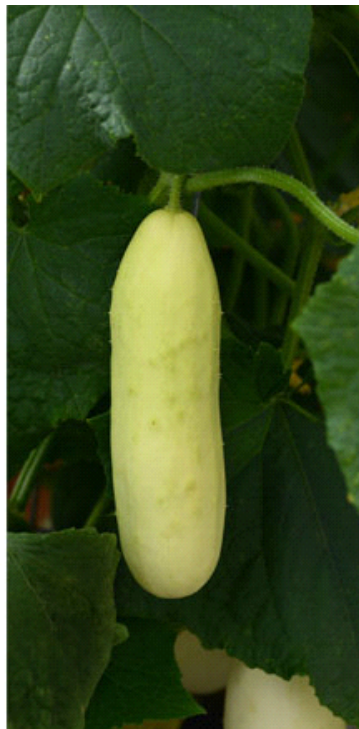


Cover Story

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Edgy Veggies

Ellen C. Wells



Red Asparagus Bean, Martini Cucumber, Midnight Snack Cherry Tomato & Mad Hatter Pepper

Move over, round white potatoes and boring ol' peas. You've got some competition in the garden and on the plate. Vegetables with pizzazz and an impact on the palate are about to burst onto the scene. Driven by a desire for what's new, what's tasty and what's different, there's a literal truckload of edibles for today's gardeners to explore.

The Snob Factor

Diane Blazek, executive director for All-America Selections and National Garden Bureau, not only sees a lot of new and interesting edibles come through the AAS Trialing program, but also receives a wealth of feedback from the consumer and garden writer perspectives.

What are they looking for? "Unique. Always," Diane says. She explains it as a straight-out "snob factor." She continues, "You garden because you like to, but you don't want to just keep growing the 'same old, same old.' If you

are growing edibles to serve your company, then you want it to be different.” Diane is super-excited about the new pepper Mad Hatter from PanAmerican Seed, an AAS winner, for its unique hat-like shape, but it also benefits the gardener because Mad Hatter is vigorous, early and produces lots of fruits.

Apart from uniqueness, Diane thinks that being successful in the garden is driving many gardeners to make the switch from heirloom varieties to hybrids. “I think we’re a little bit over the hump of the heirloom honeymoon,” she notes. “You’ve got this heirloom which tastes great, but when you take that heirloom and make a hybrid of it, you get disease resistance, maybe a more compact plant, you get a heck of a lot more fruit per plant and they still taste awesome.”

What’s New Sells

Chef and storyteller Jonathan Bardzik is a bridge between the work breeders are doing and the folks doing the actual cooking. He believes we’ve hit a critical mass in terms of people who are foodies and are comfortable with food. “That group, driven by social media, is looking for what’s new even beyond what tastes good. What’s new sells.” He gives the example of a pawpaw, which he says is difficult to work with but, “they are different and so they get media attention.”

Jonathan sees an opportunity for pumpkins and winter squashes to really grab some limelight. The large, unwieldy varieties that store well in the basement over the winter just aren’t needed by today’s home cook, who neither has the need to feed a large family nor has the space to store them. Smaller, single-serving varieties such as AAS winner Butterscotch butternut are finding their way into the garden and kitchen. Also ripe for some attention, according to Jonathan, are some underappreciated brassicas such as bok choy, napa cabbage, turnips and rutabagas. “Other than those, I think we are waiting for the next big surprise in breeding. Is there a new color beet? Is there a new shape or color of tomato?”

Finding Novelty Within the Norm

Josh Kirschenbaum, vegetable account manager for PanAmerican Seed, says the breeding direction for the company isn’t necessarily working on new classes of vegetables, but finding novelties within a standard class. He gives the previously mentioned Mad Hatter pepper as an example, along with the white-skinned Martini Cucumber, the striped Candy Cane snacking pepper and the purple-shouldered Midnight Snack cherry tomato. “I think items that are striped or different in some way are becoming a little more of the norm. Hopefully we’re having some effect in getting people exposed to that.”

Josh attributes the growing popularity of something like kohlrabi and ethnic vegetables, for instance, to farmers markets. “Farmers are trying to differentiate themselves by having interesting and unique vegetables that are Instagramable,” Josh says. “What I’m hoping is that consumers and gardeners will enjoy the flavor of those, learn ways to cook with them and continue to grow them so they won’t be so edgy eventually.”

Keep an eye out for PanAmerican Seed to introduce a seedless pepper in the near future.

Inspired by Asia and Ancient Foods

Speaking of ethnic vegetables, Patty Buskirk of Seeds By Design says her company has been looking toward Asia for unique and tasty edibles for development and introduction, from Asian specialty greens to beans. The asparagus bean was her first pick for an “edgy veggie.” A long and slender pole bean that comes in both green and red versions, Patty says they are stunning in the garden and are incredible in a stir fry.

Dry beans are another category she thinks should be breaking into the mainstream soon, “especially when you’re talking about gluten-free and protein replacements,” she says. Tepary beans, from an ancient Southwest U.S. culture, have twice the amount of protein as a regular dry bean. An added bonus is it has a pretty purple flower, too.

As for other top picks for the next “edgy veggie,” Patty mentioned winter squashes and colorful additions to turnips and radishes. It seems she is on the same wavelength as Chef Jonathan.

Feeding the Foodie

Developing new and unique varieties for chefs and food lovers alike is the goal of the Foodie Fresh Collection from Burpee. The Dragon Roll shishito pepper was one such item Burpee rolled out this spring. Burpee’s take on this popular Japanese pub food item produces loads of hint-of-heat fruit, each with a 10% chance of being very spicy. Katie Rotella, marketing communications for Ball Horticultural Company, was very pleased herself with Burpee’s new Gladiator paste tomato, which produced tons of large-sized fruits in her own garden. It’s also bred to resist calcium deficiencies, preventing blossom end rot.

“The other ‘edgy veggie’ I hope retailers take advantage of is Peppermint Stick celery,” Katie says. “It’s a long-lasting plant for their kitchen herb gardens, as well as an ‘edible ornamental’ landscape choice because of its texture and scent. Its stalk and foliage can be used as a finishing spice for soups, stews and salads. Plus it’s the perfect swizzle-stick size for mixing cocktails or summer drinks, too!”

Whether they are for main dishes, sides or even cocktails, horticulture’s plant breeders are working hard—and literally searching the world—for edibles that will inspire the gardener and home cook. And thanks to a more cosmopolitan and informed population, the edgy veggies breeders are developing will find a market. “There’s so much information out there and we’re traveling a lot more,” Jonathan notes. “I think we are ready for our food to challenge us. I think there’s a market out there that is ready to receive it with open arms.” **GP**