



GROWING COURGETTES

Courgettes come in a variety of shapes and colours, from the classic long green, round and stripy, to funky-looking, warty and bulbous yellow, not forgetting the flying saucer-shaped patty pans. Courgettes are quick to grow, with a plentiful harvest right through to the end of summer into early autumn.

Seed Sowing

Sow courgette seeds in pots indoors from April and plant out in May, or sow directly in the soil in early to mid-May if your area is mild enough. The plants are very cold-sensitive, so cover them with fleece if there is a danger of frost. For an extended harvest, do two sowings—one in April and another in early June.

Transplanting

Choose a warm, sunny, sheltered spot. Ensure your seed bed is free from weeds. Squashes are hungry and benefit from a good dose of manure or compost added to the soil before planting. Courgettes are tender plants and will need hardening off before planting out, spacing them around 90 cm apart. Water well. Using mulch around the plant will help retain moisture, leaving a gap around the stem.

Plant Care

Courgettes are fun to grow. As long as they are well-watered, the fruits mature pretty quickly, so harvest often to encourage more growth. Once the fruits start to swell, you can give a liquid feed every 10-14 days to boost growth.

Challenges

Powdery Mildew is a common problem. Ensure good airflow by not planting too close, and water the soil, not the leaves. Remove any badly affected leaves when the white powdery mildew appears.

Harvest

Start picking young courgettes early to encourage more growth; they will keep coming. In a good year, you can harvest up to three per week from one plant. The flowers are edible; pick the male flowers and leave the female flowers (you can see the tiny fruits behind the base of petals). The young leaves are also edible, but leave enough for the plant to survive; use them like spinach.

Culinary Ideas

Courgettes are a staple in many Mediterranean dishes. There are many recipes to try, from the classic ratatouille, quiches, and tarts to vegetable bakes and sliced into long, thick steaks for the BBQ. The flowers are great stuffed with cheese, dipped in tempura batter, and fried until crisp; you can do this with the young leaves also.

Seed Saving

To save seed, leave some fruits on the plant and allow them to grow large (they can get huge). Once their colour changes (colour change depends on the original colour), you can cut off the fruits and leave them in a warm, dry place for four weeks to encourage further seed ripening. Cut open the fruit and remove the seeds with a spoon or ice-cream scoop. Wash the pulp off the seeds and leave them to dry in a well-ventilated place in a single layer.