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May Lecture

Pollinator Gardening
May 19, 10:00 am

Presenter:
Jennifer Walker, SRCMGV

SRC Extension Building
6263 Dogwood Dr.
Milton, FL



Like Blue Flowers? Try Blue Ginger

Dichorisandra thyrsiflora

Debbie Clark, SRCMGV

I "discovered" this lovely plant three years ago at the Santa Rosa County Master Gardeners plant sale. It was in bloom at the time with spiky, 5-6 inch violet-blue flowers and interesting, clumping deep green leaves. It is not a true ginger. Rather, it is related to the wandering Jew and spiderwort family. Regardless, it shares many of the same growing conditions as many of our more commonly grown gingers. Blue Ginger is *not* an edible plant.

It is best grown in moist, rich well-drained soils in part shade. It needs some protection from the hot afternoon sun. Good news: it likes *humid* growing conditions! Plant in locations protected from strong winds as it can grow 3-5 feet tall.



Winter hardy to USDA Zones 10-12, makes it "iffy" during our rare freezing months. Native to Brazil, it is evergreen in South Florida, but can die to the ground in Northwest Florida's colder climate.

Even though mine died back, it recovered nicely albeit slowly over the past cold winters in Navarre.

Blue Ginger can be propagated by division, cuttings or seed. It

Photo Credit: Debbie Clark, SRCMGV



can also be grown in containers with bright indirect indoor light. Aphids and bugs can be pests.

This plant can make a very striking addition to your garden, especially when spotted by garden visitors. It is definitely a plant worthy of your attention if you can be mindful of its cold sensitivity.

Growing Chayote Squash (*Sechium edule*)

Pam Hill, SRCMGV

Introduction:

Chayote squash is a native plant to Guatemala and Mexico; however, historical records indicate that this distinct gourd was used in North America as early as 1867. The deep south and particularly the city of New Orleans, has a long and unique history with the Chayote squash, also known as the **Mirliton**. Migration from the Caribbean as well as the banana trade have helped contribute to its popularity. The US Agriculture department attempted to introduce this member of the gourd family to a broader population in the 1920's using a Cuban variety cultivated in Homestead, FL. Since botanists refer to the vegetable as a "fruit", it took on the name "vegetable pear", the public was completely confused as to whether it was actually a vegetable or a fruit. The lack of consumer interest ended the federal program and this eccentric little gourd retreated back to the New Orleans and the deep South area where it is beloved and celebrated still today.

Varieties:

The knobby, pale green, oblong squash is, in fact, a Member of the Cucurbitaceae family which includes cucumbers, melons and gourds. This strange looking squash looks as if it came straight out of Dr. Suess's imagination.

While there are many varieties of *Sechium edule* (Seek'-ee-uhm Ed'-yeh-lee) there are generally two commercial varieties grown primarily in Louisiana, Florida and the Southwestern states. One is a medium sized, pear shaped, smooth skin with pale green exterior and lighter green flesh and the other is a smaller, globular shape with a pale green exterior and lighter green flesh. The fruit's characteristics vary widely from dark green to pure white; smooth and spiny; ridged and knobby. Flavors and textures also differ.

Popular Florida varieties include the Florida Green and the Monticello White. Mirlitons are easily pollinated by bees and other insects, and this makes it difficult to maintain genetic uniformity or define a specific variety. While Mirlitons can be grown from cuttings of a mother plant to retain an exact copy of the original plant, crop production is compromised after the first year.



More from the Author:

People are interested in this quirky vegetable. My ancestors who lived in New Orleans grew this as a staple in their gardens in the 1800's. They are a Holiday tradition in dishes such as Mirliton dressing, Shrimp and Mirliton bisque. I also made Mirliton muffins (think banana bread).

We Mirliton growers sprout, aka "sack" our seedlings. Sacking is when we place them in a dark place undisturbed for sprouting. Mine sprouts in a kitchen cabinet. I pray I don't forget it because the vine will become quite long and once it has sprouted it needs to be placed in dirt.

Growing Requirements:

Mirlitons are generally a self-sufficient plant that is resistant to most diseases and pests. They do require six hours of full sun daily and can endure a full day of tropical sun. The plant will spread shallow roots in a 12-foot diameter circle and if started in part sun and trellised correctly will seek out full sun. Proper air circulation and good sunlight are most important in deterring airborne plant diseases. Mirlitons love sandy, well drained loamy soil with a pH of 6.0-6.8. This makes the Gulf Coast of Florida a perfect area for Mirliton



Mirlitons growing on a fence

growing. While this plant is compact at the ground level, they do require a six-foot root radius around the plant that should be mulched frequently to maintain nutrients and retain moisture. A mature plant can sprawl out up to 40 feet and fruit best when trellised horizontally. Backyard Mirliton vines are a staple in many homes in New Orleans as they love a good old chain link fence. The vines have been known to sprawl up 30 feet in oak trees and drop “Mirliton bombs” on those below!

Planting and Propagation:

Mirlitons come complete with their own supply of water and fertilizer: the fruit flesh. While you can plant the fruit before it sprouts or germinates, using sprouted plants has the best results. Sprouted Mirlitons may be directly planted in the ground or in 2-gallon pots for later transplanting. When planted in the spring, the Mirliton will send off stems and will flourish through the summer. Typically, the plant will begin to flower 110-120 days after planting. Since Mirlitons are “photoperiodic” plants, they flower when the length of day and night are equal (fall equinox). There will be hundreds of male flowers and only a few females and once fertilized, the female flowers will mature into harvestable fruit within 30 days. Plants will continue to flower and fruit well in to December, but the smaller fruits will be damaged and fall off when the temperatures fall below 55-degree.



Photo credit LSU Ag Center

Fertilization and Watering:

UF/IFAS suggest that Florida growers apply one pound of 6-8-8 at planting, again in mid-summer and finally when the first fruits are small and just appearing. Excessive Nitrogen is a concern because Mirlitons are like tomatoes and too much nitrogen can create a robust plant but reduce flowering and fruiting. Water on a weekly basis but be mindful of excessive spring and summer rain. A healthy plant will wilt during the August heat but will regain water at night through the process of “imbibition”.

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Harvesting:

Mirliton fruit will mature approximately 30 days after pollination. Test for harvesting by pushing on the fruit skin with your thumbnail. If the fruit dents, the fruit is still immature and will be watery. If it is firm and does not dent, it is ready to pick. Fruit left on the vine too long will become larger but stringy. Mirliton have a very short shelf life and will begin to sprout in 4-6 weeks.

Conclusion:

Mirlitons are the ultimate lazy persons vegetable. They come complete with their own planting kit, grows well on its own, and you seldom have to water or feed it. You can literally sit under the shade of it and wait for the fruit to fall in your lap.

References:

James M. Stephens, UF/IFAS Extension Pinellas County
Anna Timmerman, LSU Ag Center

“Starting a Compost Pile”

Daniel E. Mullins
Extension Horticultural Agent Santa Rosa County, Retired



Photo Credit:
Karolina Grabowska, Unsplash

Composting can help gardeners to keep a supply of ready to use organic soil conditioner. Good compost is ideal for enriching flower and vegetable beds, and can even be used in potting mixtures.

Composting is easy to do and yields a manure-like organic fertilizer/soil conditioner that is highly beneficial on Florida's infertile native soils. A small compost pile measuring 3'x3'x3' (1 cubic yard) can be easily made.

First, a bin can be constructed using treated lumber, concrete blocks, wire or other durable materials. This is simply to contain the material. Composting can also be done in the open, without containment.

Once the area has been prepared, create 12-inch layers of plant waste such as leaves, lawn clippings, shredded branches and wood chips. Onto each layer, distribute one cup each of dolomite lime and 8-8-8 garden fertilizer. Chicken litter or other manure can be used as a substitute for the fertilizer.

Moisten each layer as the pile is built, and keep it moist. The pile will begin to heat up after about a week. Temperatures up to 140 degrees in the center are not unusual. Composters call this process “cooking”, and some serious decomposition is taking place. The pile should be mixed every 3 to 4 weeks as long as it continues to heat.

Compost requires 2 to 12 months to reach the right stage of decomposition. The time will vary depending upon the ingredients used; the size of the pile and how well it is maintained.

I have had the opportunity to meet some expert local composters and observe how they have fine tuned their systems. One of the most practical that I have seen is the “three pile system.” Using three bins, it is possible to have ready-to-use compost in one; compost that is “cooking” in a second; and a third that is receiving fresh material. These are rotated as the stage of decomposition, or use, progresses.

The system that is most impressive was made of treated 2x6s, and was a total of 15 feet long by 5 feet high. It was divided equally into 5 foot sections. Each section had a removable front for easy access.

Troubleshooting a Compost Pile:

Although composting is easy, gardeners sometimes fail in their first attempt, and it is usually because one of the basics has been overlooked. Following are the most common causes and recommended cures:

- “My compost has a bad odor.” This occurs when there is not enough air circulation within the pile and it becomes waterlogged. Add some coarse materials such as chopped leaves, straw or shredded wood products.
- “My compost pile won’t heat up and begin to decompose.” It is either too dry or does not contain enough nitrogen to begin the process. Add some fertilizer and keep the pile moist.
- “My compost pile heats up, but I don’t know the proper time to turn it.” Purchase a compost thermometer. This is one of the most useful tools that a composter can have. It has a long probe that can be inserted into the center of the pile and left in place. By checking the dial every few days, you will know when the compost reaches its highest temperature and then begins to cool. This is the time to turn the pile over, mixing undecomposed parts to the center. Repeat the process until the pile no longer reaches high temperatures and it is finished.



Photo credit: Pior_Malczyk/istock/thinkstock

- “I don’t know what to put in a compost pile.” Most plant parts, including kitchen scraps, can be put in the pile. Coarser materials take longer to compost, so there is a size limit. Don’t use diseased plants. Also, do not use grease or meat because ants and scavenging animals will be attracted.

This article was written on July 19, 1997. Some recommendations or practices may have changed since this article was written.

Question of the Week: Mushrooms are popping up all over my lawn. Is there a lawn disease present?

Answer: No, mushrooms are common during rainy periods and most are not associated with plant diseases. Their numbers will decrease when drier weather returns. Just mow over them and caution children not to handle or eat them. Some of our common species of mushrooms are poisonous.

Where can I find more information?

UF/IFAS SRCMGV Websites:

<https://www.srcmastergardeners.org>

<https://sfyl.ifas.ufl.edu/santa-rosa/master-gardener-volunteer-information/>

Facebook:

Santa Rosa County Master Gardeners: <https://www.facebook.com/SRCMasterGardeners>

Santa Rosa County Extension: <https://www.facebook.com/SRCExtension/>

Gardening in the Panhandle: <https://www.facebook.com/GardeningInThePanhandle/>

UF/IFAS Gardening Solutions website: <https://gardeningsolutions.ifas.ufl.edu/>

Master Gardener webinars:

<https://gardeningsolutions.ifas.ufl.edu/mastergardener/volunteers/education/webinars.html>

Gardening in the Panhandle web archives: <http://nwdistrict.ifas.ufl.edu/hort/>

Listing of local Extension Offices: <https://sfyl.ifas.ufl.edu/find-your-local-office/>

The Santa Rosa County Residential Horticulture Agent, Josh Criss, can be reached at 850-623-3868. joshua.criss@ufl.edu