

Chi Qua

Benincasa hispida var. *chieh gua*

Otherwise known as...

Hairy melon, fuzzy gourd, Chinese preserving melon, wax gourd, moa qua ("hairy gourd")

Background

While chi qua ("jointed gourd") may be unfamiliar to many Europeans, it is one of the staples of the Chinese diet. Chi quas are distinguished by their coating of fine hairs. The gourds need to be handled carefully, as the hairs can cause skin irritations

Chi qua is actually the immature fruit of a variety of dong qua (winter melon, *Benincasa hispida*). To add to the confusion, young dong quas are sometimes sold as chi qua. Like dong quas, chi quas form a whitish waxy coating on their skins if left to mature. However, dong quas can grow to a massive size (20kg or more!). They are also round rather than oval and usually waxier than chi quas.

Where and How does it grow?

Chi qua vines can be allowed to simply sprawl over the ground or can be trained over a trellis - the latter makes it easier to pick the gourds before they grow too big. The plant has large, deeply lobed leaves and hairy stems. They need daytime temperatures of 25-35°C, night temperatures that don't fall much below 10°C, lots of water and plenty of fertiliser to do well. However, the plants are quite hardy and will tolerate a lot of drying out and still recover spectacularly when they are finally watered.

Preparation and Cooking

The best quality chi quas are the hairy ones! This shows that they are fresh, young, and have not been handled too much. It is best to pick them up using a plastic bag as a glove - the fine hairs can be irritating, especially to those with sensitive skin. However, the hairs are easily rubbed off with a sponge or paper towelling after purchase. Chi quas are a tropical vegetable and are sensitive to temperatures less than 10°C. For this reason, it is best to store them in a cool place (12-15°C) rather than inside the fridge. As their skin is a good barrier to water loss, they can stay firm for up to two weeks under these conditions.

Very young chi quas can be eaten raw, but the vegetables are more usually cooked. They have a mild, pleasant flavour not unlike zucchini. They can be peeled, then chunks added to soup or steamed. Sliced or shredded chi qua is a good addition to a stir fry. They are particularly good when the seedy core is scraped out and the gourd stuffed with pork, prawns or other flavoursome mixture before baking or steaming.



steamed chi qua

Nutritional Value

Chi quas contain small amounts of calcium, phosphorus, iron and other micronutrients.



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