



Urban Harvest

Growing gardens. Enriching lives.

Tropical Summer Vegetables

Bob Randall

Tropical heat is bearing down on us again and we are in for five months of really tough heat. What should gardeners do? Well, *when the growing gets tough, the tough start growing*. Tough plants for tropical conditions are of course tropicals. Many of them grow just fine here, but because they are poorly known except among people from the tropics, they are rarely planted by Houston gardeners.

Some tropicals you might consider planting now are Jamaican sorrel, long beans, ginger, water spinach, chaya, Malabar spinach, and yucca (tapioca root).

Jamaican Sorrel

Jamaican sorrel is also known as roselle and Florida cranberry. It is a member of the *Hibiscus* genus of plants, but looks like a red stemmed version of its cousin the okra. It is very popular in Central America and the Caribbean, and is sold dried in many Latino markets in the United States. Most of the "hibiscus teas" sold in U.S. supermarkets are probably made from this plant.

The edible part is not the pod however. Rather, between the okra-like flower and the flower stem is a thick red calyx shaped like a cup that holds the petals to the stem. It is this delicious calyx that is boiled for a juice or made into a less bitter jelly otherwise indistinguishable from cranberry jelly. Jamaican sorrel is grown just like okra, but it takes even more months than okra to produce its first pods because it only blooms when the daylight hours shorten in fall. At that time, a large plant will produce enormous numbers of okra like pods just in time for many fall Texas cranberry-like treats.

Water Spinach

Water spinach is one of the best vegetables you can grow. This is not the shiny-leafed, much less tasty summer spinach known as Malabar or running spinach. Water spinach grows in wet clay or bogs, but does much better in raised beds, and it does so all summer long even with little water. It is a relative of the sweet potato and the morning glory, but it's delicious, mild, tender leaves are what you grow it for. These leaves do not taste much like spinach, but they make a wonderful cooked green.

The plant has a different name in each Asian country where it is grown, but seeds are sold in Vietnamese groceries under the name *hot Rau Mooing* in Vietnamese. One place other than Urban Harvest where you can usually buy seeds is the Kim Hung Market at St. Emanuel and McIlhenny. Sunrise Seeds sells Water Convolvovus. Also, if you are in an Asian food market, look for the characteristic hollow stems and deep green sweet potato like leaves. If you find it, put the stems in water and they will root quickly.

You can plant vines about a foot apart down the middle of a raised bed, mulch and let the vines run as you do with sweet potatoes, or you can let the vines grow up a trellis or tomato cage.

You begin to harvest as soon as the vines are several feet long. Cut off about 18 inches of the tip, combine with several more such tips, then pull off the leaves. One way to cook them is to sauté onions until translucent, then sauté the spinach until tender, then add a little vinegar.

Long Beans

Long beans are also called asparagus beans possibly because they are long like asparagus spears. Long beans are one of the most productive and easy summer crops you can grow. They are a close relative of the black-eyed pea, and make an edible pod quite similar to the most edible pods on Southern peas.

Long beans are high in protein and fiber, are one of the most productive and easiest beans to grow, they improve the soil, and are an excellent way to trap and destroy next year's breeder stink bugs. Long beans are planted like pole beans on a trellis, but they tolerate much more heat than do pole beans so they can be planted all summer. They often get 15 or more inches long while still being tasty. Once the seeds begin to expand they must be picked.

If you grow long beans, your big problem will be picking them all and using them. They need to be sautéed in a bit of onions and oil in order to taste good, boiling or steaming is less rewarding. Also, most people do not know this, so the beans are not very welcome gifts. The result is that long beans often go unpicked, they go to seed, and then new plants come up the following spring. Seeds are thus very easy to save, and Urban Harvest is providing them from two strains we have come to appreciate.

Ginger

Ginger is a member of the rain forest Ginger Family of plants. The edible root is fairly easy to grow: just take the roots found in supermarkets, divide them so that each piece has 1-2 good "eyes," and plant them in a pot near the surface, and keep damp and warm (80°) until the plant produces a good set of leaves. Then plant outside in deep or light shade with lots of organic matter. Ginger benefits from a regular application of a balanced organic fertilizer and irrigation during dry periods.

To use it, dig the root, wash it, then boil pieces in water to make tea; or freeze pieces for curries or other spicy dishes. One of my favorites is to boil ginger in water to make fresh ginger tea. Then there is Urban Harvest Board Member Jeanne Sickman's Fresh Ginger Cake.

So who says it's too hot to garden?

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