



Urban Harvest

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## Homegrown Chinese Vegetables for the Houston Area

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I love vegetables. As a child growing up in the countryside of Taiwan, I watched the rice farmers and their water buffaloes plow the fields. My brothers and I loved to chase each other up the narrow paths between the rice patties. After the farmer harvested the rice, the field became our playground. We would pick up pieces of dried clay and shape them into small square pieces to build an oven. We collected and burned dry hay to heat up the oven until the clay became red.

While it heated, we would swipe some sweet potatoes from a nearby field and put them into the oven. After stomping down on the clay roof, the hot clay buried the potatoes and cooked them. After one hour we eager kids went back for the most delicious, baked sweet potatoes known to mankind. Even now, the sweet, earthy, hot flavors remain in my mind.

I realized how much that I enjoyed eating and cooking on the day my husband pointed out that I scheduled my daily activities around shopping and cooking. Many Chinese people have this same trait. A typical meal for a Chinese housewife includes steamed rice with 3 dishes and a soup. One of the dishes would always be a stir-fried, green-leaf vegetable; another might be shredded meat with some kind of vegetable. Most soups also included vegetables. For Chinese people, vegetables are the major food source.

I have grown Chinese vegetables in Houston for many years. I also often trade vegetables with my Chinese friends. We share experiences, seeds and recipes. We all use Urban Harvest's raised-bed concept to grow the vegetables.

### Cool Weather Vegetables

Winter brings Chinese New Years. Vegetables bring back fond memories for me. For a child in Taiwan, Chinese New Years is something to wish for every day. During the holidays we receive new clothes, all kinds of candies, cookies and delicious foods, firecrackers, money from elders and best of all, no punishments are meted out during this joyous time.

It is a time when everyone slows down to visit, eat, play and rest. The markets will close for 5 days. My mother would need to prepare a lot of food in advance for visiting relatives and friends. Before the holidays, she would make two gigantic steamed-daikon radish rice cakes. Each would be the size of a very large pizza and 3-4 inches thick. Many friends and relatives would visit us just to sample her rice cakes. Even now, I still crave for the mouth-watering rice cake.

Winter is also the best time for green leafy vegetables, especially in Taiwan where the rice is harvested during the fall. The rice field becomes the farmer's winter vegetable garden. They grow

daikon radishes, Chinese cabbages, Chinese mustard greens, Chinese broccoli and other vegetables. Surplus vegetables will also allow them to make all kinds of pickles and dry foods for the rest of the year.

Houston has a similar climate to Taiwan. Most of these same Chinese vegetables grow very well in our area. They are almost insect-free. I love to grow cold-season vegetables, especially all kind of salads and leafy greens. I think that fresh, sweet, crisp vegetables from your own home-garden are the best reward for a gardener who works on a cold winter day.

The following list contains the Chinese vegetables that I grow and find suitable for Houston's late fall, winter and spring seasons.

### **Cold Season Chinese Vegetables**

- **Tatsoi or Tah-Tsai:** This vegetable has dark green leaves in the shape of a pretty rosette. They are mild and delicious. The young leaves are excellent in a salad. They can also be stir-fried with garlic. This vegetable takes a little long to grow but resists cold well.
- **Edible Chrysanthemum (called Shingiku in Japan):** You can use the leaves and stems as flavorings in soup. Small leaf varieties are popular in Japan and have thinner leaves. This variety is my favorite salad green. Round, big leaf varieties are popular in China. This variety is good for soup, and is pretty much required for fondue-style
- **Chinese hot pots.** The big leaf variety is less tolerant to cold weather than the small leaf one.
- **Winter Chinese Lettuce (Celtuce):** It has celery-like stalks and lettuce-like leaves. This is how the vegetable was named. The mature center stalk is edible and often marinated with soy sauce in a salad, or stir-fried. It tastes very tender and crispy. The leaves are used in salads like any lettuce. It is very easy to grow and is also productive.
- **Snow peas:** A lot of Chinese grow this for the tender shoot instead of the peas themselves. The more you harvest, they more they produce. It is considered a delicacy among the vegetables. Most often it is fixed like spinach and stir-fried with garlic.
- **Chinese Broccoli (Kailaan):** This is a very popular winter green vegetable. After the first cutting of the main stem, the plant will grow many branches for subsequent harvests and can be quite productive. The leaves and stems are very good for stir-frying.
- **Kohlrabi:** Both green and purple kohlrabi is excellent for salad and soup. You can peel and slice young kohlrabi like a potato chip – only they are raw, fresh and juicy. You can serve these with a dip.
- **Chinese celery:** It has thinner stalk and stronger flavor than regular American celery. Use it like cilantro to add flavor to your soup, beans and rice. Or, stir-fry it with meat and tofu. It is very easy to grow and if you let it go to seed you will have it in your garden next year.
- **Daikon radish:** This root vegetable has many culinary purposes and is a favorite winter vegetable for Chinese. Daikons are used in soups, stews, rice cakes, and pickles. Their young leaves can be stir-fried or pickled. Many cooks add daikon to make soups sweeter.
- **Chinese chive (garlic chive):** If you go to just about any Chinese garden you will definitely find Chinese chives.
- Although they are considered an herb, the Chinese use them as vegetables. Chives are often stir fried with eggs, tofu, or noodles. In my opinion, the most delicious way to cook chives is to make chive dumplings. It is easy to grow and can be harvested all year round. They are tolerant of any soil condition. The flower is edible and very delicious. Sometimes you will find light-yellow

chives in the market, which were covered with dark material in their growing process. These are considered an expensive delicacy.

I typically start my winter garden in late fall, around October. Starting in November or December is also viable. At this changeover in gardens I enhance my soil in the raised beds. I add and till in new compost, composted chicken manure, and kelp powder. The winter season is easier because the vegetables grow in a slower and more controlled manner. We should consider ourselves fortunate that we can have a winter garden here in the Houston area. It is a true luxury to have all the beautiful, tasty and fresh lettuce. Yum-yum.

### Summer Chinese Vegetables

The following is a list of summer vegetables. These vegetables grow well in Houston and are fairly insect resistant.

- **Edible Amaranth (Chinese spinach):** It grows very well in the hot Houston summer. It is a very fast-growing vegetable. After you cut them they will quickly grow again. Seeds are very small and once you have let them go to seed you will probably have the amaranth in your garden next season. Edible young leaves and stems are cooked like spinach. The soft texture and tender leaves make it excellent for stir-fry and soup dishes. There are three popular varieties: green leaf, white leaf, and red leaf. I have tried all three of them. I particularly like the red variety very much. It seems to be less attacked by insects. The leaf is pretty and decorative.
- **Southeast Asian Spinach (called Hollow Green, Water Cress, or Ong Tsai):** It is a very popular and common summer green vegetable among the Chinese. It grows easily and rampantly in our hot summers. Cook it as spinach by stir-frying a few minutes with garlic.
- **Chinese cucumber:** It is every Chinese home gardener's favorite. Compared to regular cucumbers, Chinese cucumbers are slimmer, have less seeds and thinner skin. They are crisp and delicious. You will find they are one of the easiest and most satisfying summer crops.
- **Asparagus beans or Yard-long beans:** I have had very good luck growing it. I love their texture and flavor. Twelve to fifteen beans can create one serving dish. Chop them up into 2-inch lengths, then stir-fry with garlic or shredded pork.
- **Summer Chinese Lettuce (Summer Celtuce):** A vegetable in between lettuce and dandelion. It has very long stalks and the lettuce-like leaves. It can grow up to 4 to 5 feet tall and is very hardy as well as productive. It is excellent for light cooking (stir-fry with garlic) or juicing.
- **Edamame (Green Soy Beans):** Green soybean, called Edamame in Japan, is grown mainly for the young green-shelled beans, and not for the matured soybean crops. Pick the pods when they are plump and begin to lose their green color. Steam or boil for 5 minutes, then shell the beans for eating. Beans are very tasty and delicious.
- **Bitter Melon:** This is a favorite among many Chinese who have an acquired taste for this unusual vegetable. To remove the bitterness you may throw away the initial cooking water, or slice the melon to thin pieces then soak it in cold, salted water for a few hours before cooking. There are two varieties: green-colored and white-colored. I always grow the white-colored variety because it is prettier, has more flesh and is less bitter. Chinese often use strong flavored ingredients like fermented black beans or pickled mustard to remove some of the bitterness. Although it is an acquired taste it is reputed to have a lot of medicinal benefits.
- **Luffa (Chinese Okra):** Chinese not only grow it to produce Luffa sponges, they mainly grow it to eat. The young Luffa squash can be eaten raw, or cooked with noodle soup, or stir-fried with garlic. Both the leaves and flower buds are edible. It grows rampantly with little care. A single vine can produce many squash.

- Chinese Gourd (Calabash Gourd): It is an extremely vigorous climbing vine in warm climates. There are many varieties producing fruits of different shapes and sizes. The plant is easy to grow and is almost free from disease and insect. The gourd is picked when immature and cooked like a squash.
- Winter Melon (wax gourd or Doan Gwa): It is a very big melon that can grow up to 50 pounds. If properly stored in cool place, it will stay fresh for a whole year. Commonly people cook it in a soup. It has a very light flavor that absorbs flavors from other ingredients.
- Sweet Potato Leaf: This vegetable is grown not for the potatoes under the ground but for its leafy greens. This vegetable is a very common summer green. It is reputed to have a lot of nutrition as it has much chlorophyll. You can cook it like spinach by stir-frying with garlic. It doesn't go to seed nor have any potatoes. To save it, you can place cuttings in a pot and bring indoors over the winter.
- Bamboo: Only the shoots are edible but often the leaves are used to wrap rice and meat dishes. This adds an earthy flavor to the rice. There are more than 50 varieties of bamboo. Many American growers think of bamboo as being aggressive in the garden, but that is not always the case. The young shoots are harvested in the summer time. These can be one of the most delicate foods you can experience. Fresh bamboo shoots are always so delicious. It doesn't matter how you cook them, and they go with just about all other foods. The plants require good soil and water to produce many quality shoots. The older growth can be used to make a trellis for your garden.

There are many more Chinese vegetables that are not listed here. In addition to getting seeds at Urban Harvest, there is a company that specializes in Oriental vegetable seeds. Dr. Randall's book, *Year Round Vegetables, Fruits and Flowers for Metro Houston*, has detailed information on growing some Chinese vegetables in the Houston area.

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