Growing Cucumbers in the Home Garden

Robert R. Westerfield, Extension Horticulturist

Cucumbers are one of the most popular crops in today's home garden. There are two types of cucumbers that can be grown – those for fresh slicing and those for pickling. Although they require substantial growing space, they can still be grown in small gardens by training vines onto vertical structures or in containers that conserve garden space. The cucumber ranges in size from the small gherkin type to the long, thin slicing variety. As a gardener, you can choose from.

Climatic Requirements

Cucumbers are a subtropical crop, requiring long, warm days, plenty of sunshine, and adequate moisture. The Georgia climate is well suited for growing cucumbers and gardeners can enjoy a harvest all summer long.

Cucumbers are in the cucurbit family with vines that bear two kinds of flowers – pistillate (female) and staminate (male). The first flowers are staminate. They drop from the vine and do not bear fruit. Subsequent flowers will include both male and female. Insect pollination is required. Recently, gynoecious plants (those bearing female flowers only or mostly female) have been introduced. These varieties tend to bear fruit earlier with a heavier yield because of the increased number of female flowers.

Cucumbers thrive best at relatively high temperatures, between 75 to 85 degrees F. The plants do not tolerate frost. Since they are a quick-growing crop, they must be well supplied with moisture and plant nutrients throughout the growing season. Water is especially critical for cucumbers during the fruiting stage.

Soils

Cucumbers can be grown successfully in many types of soils. The preferred soil is loose, well drained, and well supplied with organic matter and plant nutrients. In soils void of organic matter, work in 4-6" of finished compost or other humus to a depth of 10". The soil pH should be between 6.0 and 6.5. Soil temperature should be at least 60 degrees F before seeding for optimum germination.

Fertilizers

Lime and fertilizers are best applied using soil test results as a guide. Contact your county Extension office for information on soil testing. If a soil sample is not taken, make a pre-plant application of 5-10-10 at the rate of 3 pounds per 100 square feet. Side dress cucumbers with an additional application of nitrogen fertilizer one week after blooming begins then again three weeks later using 1 pound of 33-0-0 per 100 square feet of bed. Apply this fertilizer along one side of the row and approximately 6" from the plant's base. Cover the fertilizer with soil using a hoe or rake. Do not over fertilize as this encourages vine growth and retards fruiting.

Cultural Practices

Get a head start on growing time by starting the plants indoors 10 to 14 days before anticipated planting time. Use peat pots or pellets and avoid disturbing roots when transplanting. Planting outside should be delayed until the danger of frost has passed in the spring.

If direct seeding, cucumbers can be planted in hills consisting of four or five seeds per hill spaced 4-5' apart. If cucumbers are trellised, plant four to five seeds per foot in rows 30" apart. When plants are about 5" tall, thin them so they are approximately 12" apart.

Figure 1.

Apply mulch around plants to conserve soil moisture, prevent soil compaction and rotting of fruit, and help suppress weeds. Newspaper placed around the plants, about three sheets thick, makes an excellent mulch. Cover newspaper with an organic mulch such as straw, bark, or other wood chips to help hold down the paper and provide additional weed and moisture control (Fig. 1). Black plastic mulch or landscape fabric can also be used as a method of keeping the soil moist and minimizing weed problems.

Control weeds, insects, and diseases for optimum yield. Cucumber beetles, aphids, mites, pickle worms, bacterial wilt, anthracnose, powdery and downy mildew, and angular leaf spot are potential problems in cucumbers. The early and continuous control of the cucumber beetle is critical to success in growing cucumbers. The cucumber beetle can infect the plant with bacterial wilt as early as the cotyledon stage, when seedlings are just emerging from the ground. Bacterial wilt causes the plants to wilt and die. Avoid using insecticides in the garden when pollinating insects such as bees are working the flowers.

Avoid bitter taste in cucumbers by providing plenty of moisture as the fruit matures. Harvesting young, immature cucumbers will also help avoid any bitter taste. In addition, pickling cucumbers should be harvested before seeds mature and become hard.

Harvesting

Cucumbers are ready for harvest 50 to 70 days from planting, depending on the variety. Depending on their use, harvest on the basis of size. Cucumbers taste best when harvested in the immature stage (Fig. 2). Cucumbers should not be allowed to reach the yellowish stage as they become bitter with size. Harvest by cutting the stem 1/4" above the fruit. Do not trample the vines any more than necessary to harvest the crop.

Figure 2.

Frequent picking of cucumbers is essential as they grow and reach optimum quality. Delayed harvest results in reduced quality products and less productive plants because fruiting is an exhaustive process for the plant. Harvested cucumbers should be stored in the refrigerator.

Cultivars

Some cultivars to try in Georgia are:

Fresh Slicing (Bush)	Fresh Slicing (Vine)	Pickling	Gynoecious
Salad Bush Hybrid – 57 days to maturity	Burpless hybrid – 62 days to maturity	Bush Pickle – 48 days to maturity	General Lee – 66 days to maturity (mostly female blooms)
Bush crop – 55 days to maturity	Straight Eight – 58 days to maturity	Calypso	Calypso – 52 days to maturity (pickling)
Fanfare – 63 days to maturity	Sweet Success – 54 days to maturity	County Fair – 52 days to maturity	
	Sweet Slice – 63 days to maturity		
	Diva – 58 days to maturity		
	Marketmore 76 – 68 days to maturity		