Vegetable Histories

Ira Bletz
Supervising Naturalist
Ardenwood Historic Farm

East Bay
Regional Park District

Ardenwood's Kitchen Garden

by Ira Bletz

Tucked behind the Patterson House is Ardenwood's heirloom kitchen garden. A visit to the garden will take you back to a time when 90% of all Americans raised their own food. It was a time before supermarkets or hybrid vegetables, when fresh vegetables were only minutes from soil to supper. The kitchen garden is a small-scale example of the garden the Pattersons may have tended. All of the garden's 46 different vegetable varieties; everything from the Belgium White Carrots to the Trout Beans are the very same ones grown in California at the turn-of-the century.

Heirloom, or traditional varieties are, above all, old with some dating back 100-175 years. Each of these antiques has a story to tell. Their seeds are historic artifacts who's history and special genetic make-up warrants preservation. Many heirloom varieties have been lost, replaced by hybrids or changing tastes. Since 1900, 80% of the pea and bean varieties once grown in America have been lost. Like an endangered species of animal which has become extinct, a variety vanishes along with its unique genetic composition. A bit of the vegetable gene pool is lost forever. In this age of gene splicing, a vanishing variety may take with it secrets like disease resistance or increased yield.

These vegetable seeds are living pieces of the past which cannot be tucked away on a museum shelf. They must be planted and the seeds they produce saved for future planting. This long process has begun at Ardenwood. Bean, cucumber, squash, popcorn, pea and sunflower seeds grown in the garden one year are saved and planted in the next year's garden.

The kitchen garden is a place to learn about the Victorians by looking at and tasting the vegetables they ate. Planting, watering, composting, harvesting and saving seeds are all part of the garden's cycle of life. Weeds become food for the soil and seeds are saved for the next year.

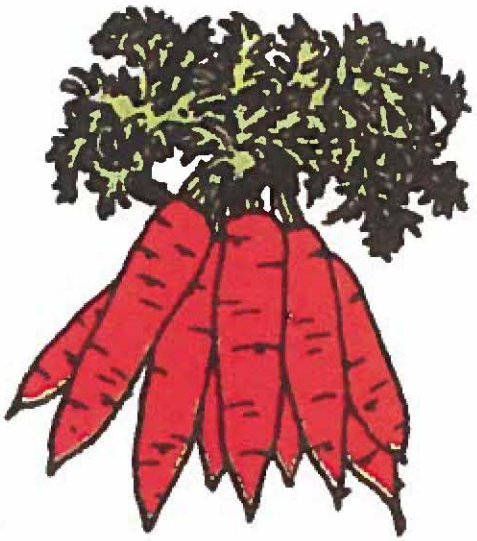
A SHORT HISTORY OF THE CARROT

by Ira Bletz

The first carrots to find their way into people's diet looked little like the cone-shaped, orange carrots of today. Thought to have originated in Afghanistan about 2,000 B.C.E. the early carrots were purple with a heavily branched root and probably would have tasted terrible to our modern palates.

The Greeks and Romans grew purple, violet, red and black carrots but the roots were still quite branched. It was not until the Moors invaded Spain that the classic cone-shaped carrot, developed in Asia Minor, arrived in Europe. The Dutch are credited with development of the sweet orange carrot back in the 1500s. Their sweetness caused carrots to be considered a dessert food. "Underground Honey" was made into pies, cakes and tarts. Carrot wine was a popular drink in colonial America.

Today the average American eats ten pounds of carrots each year. California fields produce 50% of the national carrot crop; and why not? California is, after all, Bugs Bunny's home state.



The Mad Apple

by Elizabeth Bletz

The eggplant is thought to have originated in India. Part of the deadly nightshade family, it was domesticated by the Chinese who began in the third century, to study the feasibility of using it as a food. Some three hundred years later they decided to proceed, but gingerly, for much suspicion surrounded this odd looking fruit. This is not surprising to anyone who has ever had a finger impaled on an eggplant thorn or tasted one which has bitterly past its prime. When it became apparent that one could survive a gustatory encounter with an eggplant, the Chinese began eating them in increasing numbers. The domesticated eggplant was chopped and added to curry in India but it wasn't until it reached the Middle East that eggplants soared in popularity. The ancient Persians grew bigger eggplant than their Eastern counterparts and it was there that the glossy purple eggplant was developed.

Middle Eastern Cooks have been the source for literally hundreds of eggplant recipes. One of the most intriguing is certainly the Turkish "Imam bayeldi", means "The Priest Fainted". The story goes that a religious leader was served by his wives a dish consisting of eggplant, stuffed with pine nuts and simmered in olive oil. He was so overwhelmed by its flavor that he fainted. Anyone who has sampled a really good eggplant parmesan can well understand this reaction, although one hopes that the priest was able to rouse himself in time to finish his dinner before it got cold.

European acceptance of the eggplant was a much slower process entirely. Only the Italians were brave enough to eat it although it was somewhat popular with sixteenth century gardeners who used it as an ornamental. These eggplant produced fruit which really did resemble eggs -thereby giving the plant its name.

Eggplant lore abounds, but one story which seems to explain the fruit's slow acceptance in most of Europe involves the first European to taste an eggplant. So captivated was he by its appearance that he scarfed it down whole on the spot. The resulting bout of acute gastritis he suffered was attributed to the eggplant not the appetite and the "mad apple" suffered a bum rap that followed it for many years. The eggplant was also blamed for maladies from fever to epilepsy to lust. Small wonder its acceptance was grudging at best.

It is not known when eggplant arrived in this country. Some say it came on the slave ships from western Africa and others hypothesis that Thomas Jefferson first grew eggplant at Montecello. However it got here, it no longer suffered from a negative reputation once it arrived and Americans embraced it enthusiastically if not entirely universally. It grew best in the South and was enjoyed (perhaps because of its name) as a breakfast food. With railroad expansion came increased availability of produce to the cooler climes and by the late 1800s eggplant was available to people in all parts of the country.

Today the eggplant suffers none of the indignity it once did. Although not everyone has a taste for it, at least no one thinks it will cause gustatory fits or death. The French name for eggplant, aubergine, is even used to describe a fashionable color! In fact, the worst it can do is add pounds to our hips because even though eggplant itself is relatively low in calories, it tastes so good fried or smothered with cheese ...(the writer fainted)

The Tomato:
New World Native Makes Good

by Ira Bletz

In 1591 when the Spanish arrived in Mexico, Europeans had their first contact with the tomato. A native of Western South America the tomato was widely grown from Peru to Mexico. The Spanish found the plants, with their gangly vines, ugly but the curious red fruit was interesting enough to be carried back to Europe. Since it is a member of the deadly nightshade family it was thought to be poisonous and planted only as an ornamental.

Within a few years taste overcame fear and tomatoes became a popular addition to the cuisine of old Spain. Portugal, Morocco and Italy followed the Spanish lead but England and France viewed

the tomato as attractive on the outside, like a peach, but deadly on the inside. This view is how the tomato came to be called the "wolf peach" in England.

The English brought their tomato fear with them to colonial America. It was common for doctors and ministers to speak out against the tomato. All of this changed on September 26, 1820, when on the courthouse steps in Salem, New Jersey Robert Johnson ate a tomato in public. Quite a crowd had gathered but Mr. Johnson failed to die. Soon seed companies began to offer the "love apple" and by 1860 commercial harvesting of tomatoes had begun.

The next milestone in tomato history was the 1893 U.S. Supreme Court decision declaring the tomato a vegetable. Botanically the tomato is a fruit but this was confusing since tomatoes were often sold with and eaten like vegetables. Today over 90% of home gardens contain tomatoes. California produces 33% of the nation's fresh and 85% of the processed tomatoes.

Can't Beet 'Em

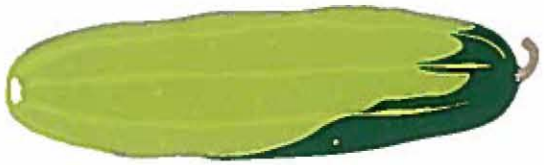
by Elizabeth Bletz

What contains vitamins A and C and potassium, has been used as a bone salve, a sinus remedy, rouge a cure for toothache, and the base for a really tasty soup? Why, the humble beet, of course. Named for its resemblance to the Greek letter beta, the beet is a relative of leafy spinach.

There are three groups of beets: root beets; leaf beets and the uncultivated seabeet. The leaf beet was the first to be domesticated, its name, chard, was derived from the Latin cardus, or thistle. Leaf chard was eaten 2,000 years ago by the Greeks and Romans but the root of this early beet was unimpressive and used chiefly as a medicine. In the second or third century, Italian farmers developed larger roots and beets began appearing at mealtimes throughout Europe. During the Middle Ages, in the first of several historical collaborations between the two countries, German farmers improved on the "Roman beef developing the rosy, round root we enjoy today.

Beets have been used and prepared in a wide variety of ways throughout culinary and nonculinary history. Sixteenth century sinus sufferers were advised to inhale beet juice to "purge the head" " Yes, but what purgeth the redde stains from betwixt the nostrils?" It was recommend that cooks of the same period wipe their beets with fresh dung before cooking them. One assumes that the beets were then peeled prior to consumption; and one is glad that twentieth century cooks use a common vegetable brush. Young women in the nineteenth century used beet 'juice as rouge, but, alas, that is the extent of the practical use for beet dye. Although it will redden cheeks, fingers, and Easter egg shells, beet dyed fabric will fade upon washing.

So beets can't be used to make dye, but they can be prepared in many dishes to die for. Russian borscht, a hearty beet soup, is a fine example and recipes for this delicacy abound. Many people enjoy beets pickled, although some beetophiles feel that pickling obscures the beet's distinctive sweetness. ff a small beet is added to apples being cooked for sauce, the resultant product will be a petty rosy pink. Beets chosen for cooking should be no larger than an orange or they will be tough and woody. One exception to this rule is the Crosby's Early Egyptian (a variety that is currently growing in Ardenwood's heirloom kitchen garden) which can, and frequently does, grow larger than a cantaloupe while remaining palatable. Now, go find a new recipe for beets and try it. See if you don't agree with John Gerard, an herbalist who in 1597 described the beet as "Not only pleasant to the taste but also delightful to the eie".



Cool But Bland

By Elizabeth Bletz

Cucumbers have been around for at least three thousand years and perhaps longer. It is most likely that they are descendants of a spiny and incredibly bitter vegetable which grew in the Himalayas and makes one wonder why anybody took the time to domesticate it. Someone did, though and the refreshing result spread quickly through the civilized world. The cucumber seems to have captured the attention and imagination most readily of people in the world's desert regions. It is reported that the Egyptians ate them daily, carried them along on their travels, and fed them to the slaves who built the great pyramids. And no wonder- the average cucumber is 96% water! It's hydrational properties notwithstanding, the cucumber has little nutritional value. An unpeeled cuke has just 1/120th of the vitamin A in a carrot; and even that is lost once the peel is removed.

Cucumbers appeared in force in Europe in the sixteenth century where some people ate them without incident and others worried that they brought on "cold noughtie humors" and possibly death. It appears that physicians used cucumbers freely to treat external maladies from fever to dog bites to acne. Women of the seventeenth century who were experiencing fertility problems were advised to dangle a cucumber unsubtly from their waist. If that didn't work they could always slice it up and place the slices on their eyes - still a tried and true method of taking the bum out after a long day of work or walking around festooned with cucumbers.

Columbus brought the garden cucumber to the New World. It seemed to do well and flourish despite its short growing season. The colonists planted cukes and by the early 1800s, at least eight varieties grew in the Americas. Most of these were pickled. Actually, the colonists pickled practically everything they ate because that was the only method of preservation available to them. As new methods of preserving food were developed, however, the cucumber pickle remained popular, and its modem incarnation differs very little from the pickles enjoyed by our ancestors.

Even though they offer little in the way of nutritional value, cucumbers are a popular addition to modem cuisine. Cucumbers are cool and refreshing in salads and when chopped and mixed with yogurt, dill and lemon juice they raise from mere garnish to almost side-dish status. Okay, so they're bland; so it has been said that the cucumber is "as close as neutrality as a vegetable can get without ceasing to exist"; to some it just wouldn't be salad without them.