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Bitter melon (*Momordica charantia*) is a tropical cucumber relative, originally from India and grown widely in southeast Asia. As you might expect from the name, it is pretty bitter, although it is generally eaten young before the bitterness reaches its peak.



Bitter melons

In my experience, there are two categories of people in the world: those who smile when you feed them a dish that contains bitter melon and those who spit it out and maybe even take a swing at you. I am in the former category. Bitter melon is one of my favorite vegetables; I am particularly fond of a breakfast dish of sliced bitter melon scrambled with eggs.

Unfortunately, bitter melon comes from tropical climate and I live in a decidedly non-tropical climate. As I also live pretty far from any large cities, it is also difficult to get bitter melon even as an import. So, I try to grow bitter melon every year. I get a few early fruits, but fall far short of a satisfying pile of good sized bitter melons. To accomplish this, I start seeds early, grow in containers, under cover, and the return on my investment of effort is still poor.

A few years ago, I thought I had a solution: we discovered canned bitter melon in an Asian market.

Imagine canned cucumber (not pickled, just canned) and you'll have some idea of the canned bitter melon experience. The taste wasn't terrible, but the texture was distressing, to say the least.

So, if I want to eat bitter melon, it seems I will have to grow it. Unfortunately, none of the varieties that I have tried have done well. We just don't get enough heat. So far, with other borderline crops, I have had good luck crossing large numbers of varieties together and selecting from them better performing progeny. Bitter melon is an outcrosser, so this approach might be a good way to start down the road to a more temperate bitter melon.

This year, I have assembled seed of every bitter melon variety that I could find. I will grow out a few of each in the greenhouse and attempt to grow them to maturity under plastic. Based on past experience, I expect that I will probably be successful with about a third of the varieties that I try. Because we keep bees on site, I can expect to get a lot of cross pollination. I will try to get as much seed as possible this year.



Bitter melon seed that will be used in my uncontrolled cross

Assuming that effort is successful, next year, I will again start many seeds in the greenhouse, but plant them outdoors without cover, hoping to get a few that have won the genetic lottery and can grow in our cool temperatures. Maybe I will get some, maybe I won't. If not, I'll keep trying. For my efforts, I can at least look forward to harvesting a few small fruits at the end of the season that would otherwise be killed by frost.

Of course, I could save myself the trouble and wait for someone else to produce a cool climate bitter melon. Unfortunately, I meet a lot more people who fall into the "punch you in the face" category than otherwise, so I have a feeling that I might be a long time waiting.

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