

Growing Vegetable Pears

The vegetable pear, also called mirliton, chayote or mango squash, is a member of the cucumber family that produces delicious one-seeded fruit in the fall. This vining plant resembles cucumbers, but is much more vigorous in growth and more prolific in fruit production. The fruit has a flavor similar to squash and is used much like squash in recipes.

The vegetable pear will grow in any section of the state. It is a perennial and will renew its growth from the roots each year if protected from freezing. It requires a well-drained, highly fertile soil with lots of organic matter. In ideal growing conditions, a single vine in the yard or garden will produce more than enough fruit for the average family. The plants require days in which the number of hours of daylight are 12 or more to begin blooming and setting fruit. Normally, fruiting begins in September and continues until frost. Occasionally in the spring, if the plant makes enough vegetative growth by May, a few fruit will set and develop a late spring crop. The main crop is produced in the fall.

Pollination

Separate male and female flowers are formed on each plant just as in all other members of the cucurbit family (squash, cucumbers, melons, etc.). The female flower can be distinguished from the male flower by the “miniature fruit” attached to the base of the flower (Figure 1).

The pollen from the male flower is transferred by insects to the female flower. After pollination, the fruit grows rapidly to maturity. The fruit reaches full size 25-30 days after pollination. A single vine may produce up to 100 fruit averaging a pound each.

It's not necessary to plant two fruit or to have two separate plants to get fruit set. Both male and female flowers are formed on each plant, and the male flower is capable of pollinating the female flower on that same plant.

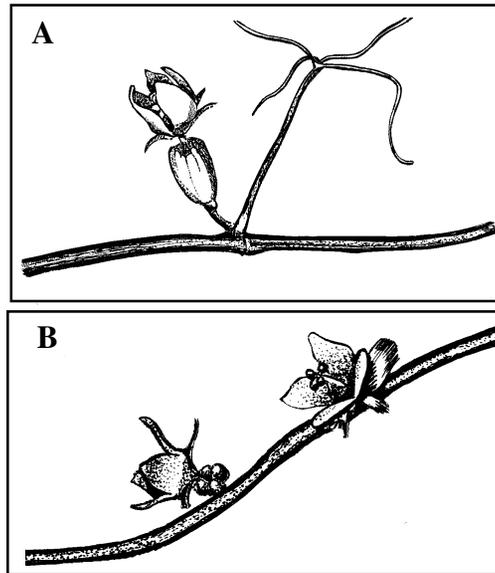


Figure 1 - Female flower, A; male flower, B.

Varieties Differ

There are several different types of vegetable pears. They differ in color, size, surface, form and quality of flesh. They range from dark green to ivory-white; from a few ounces to 2 pounds or more; from a smooth to a deeply wrinkled surface; from non-prickly to very prickly skin and from round to a flattened pear shape. All the fruit on one plant are the same shape, color, etc.

Quality vegetable pears are fiberless, with little or no seed coat around the single flat seed. The green or white pear-shaped types are the ones commonly grown in Louisiana (Figure 2).

Other types have deeply wrinkled, fibrous seed coats that toughen the flesh and make it less desirable to eat (Figure 3).



Figure 2

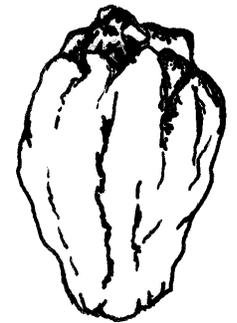


Figure 3

Soil Preparation and Planting

The vegetable pear will grow in any good garden soil, but will do best in a rich, well-drained soil high in organic matter.

The vegetable pear is usually planted in the spring after the danger of frost is over. Work the soil well. Plant the whole fruit, one to a hill. Place it on its side, with the broad end sloping slightly downward and the smaller or stem-end exposed a little (Figure 4). If the seed has a long sprout, cut it back to within an inch or two of the fruit.

Cultivation

Vegetable pears have shallow roots, so cultivation, when necessary, should be very shallow. Mulch with compost, straw, leaves or some other similar material to help control weeds and conserve moisture.

Irrigation is critical during the dry periods to keep the plant growing through the summer and to help the plant hold its fruit and increase the size of developing fruit. Mulching will help to hold the soil moisture around the shallow root system.

Give the Vines Support

Vegetable pears need some support on which to climb. A fence, a tree (if shade isn't too dense) or a trellis will provide a fairly satisfactory support. Commercial growers use large “T” trellises that furnish plenty of space

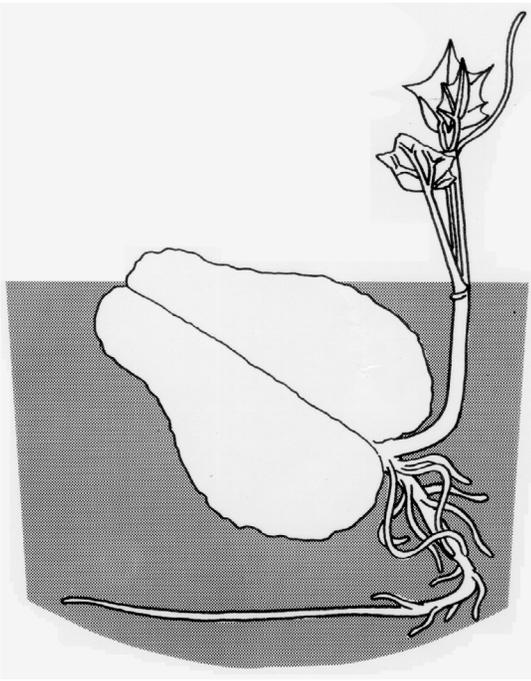


Figure 4

for the vines. A heavy fencing wire of 4-inch mesh run over the trellises makes an ideal support.

Keep the Vines Growing

Vegetable pears are vigorous growers and heavy feeders. Well-rotted stable mature gives excellent results. Use commercial fertilizer also. An 8-24-24 fertilizer at 1 ½ -2 tablespoons per hill or plant is recommended. Mix this in well before planting. Avoid an oversupply of nitrogen, because this can cause too much plant growth and possibly no fruit set. The vegetable pear is a long season plant; therefore, fertilize it at two-month intervals or as the plant seems to need plant food. Use 1 teaspoon ammonium nitrate (or its equivalent) per hill or plant during the growing season.

The plants may suffer from anthracnose disease and other pests of squash plants. Anthracnose causes numerous circular dead spots on the foliage, and the plant may lose

most of its leaves. Contact your county agent for current control practices.

Mulch for Winter Protection

The vegetable pear is a perennial. That is, the top growth is killed by frost, but it will begin to grow again each spring if you protect the roots from freezing. Do this by providing a thick, but loosely packed mulch of hay, leaves or similar material during winter.

If you intend to save fruit over winter for spring planting, let the fruit remain on the vine until it is fully mature. At this stage, the pears will have a hard flesh that is not easily punctured. Harvest before sprouts form. Handle the pears carefully in picking. Wrap them separately with thin, porous paper such as tissue paper, and pack them in a box or crate. Use excelsior or similar material between layers so air can circulate. You'll get best results if you store seed vegetable pears at a room temperature that does not fall below 45 degrees or rise above 60 degrees F. The best storage temperature is between 50-55 degrees F.

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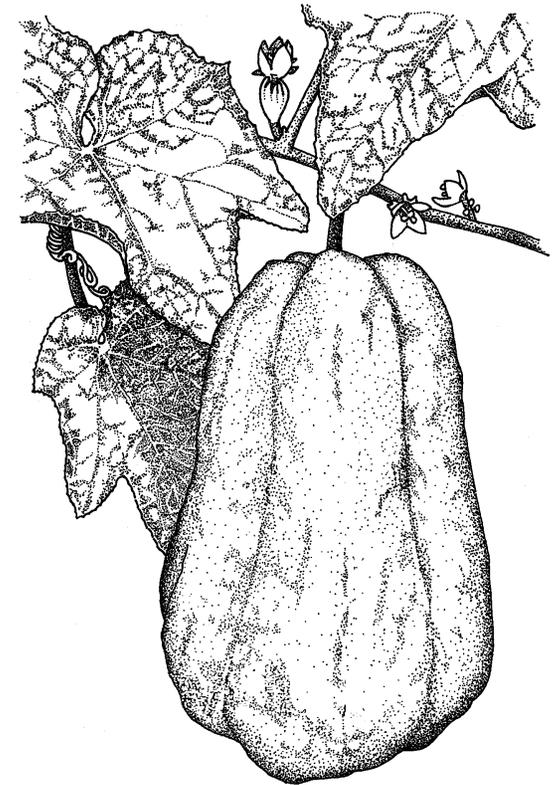
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