

Growing dudi (bottle gourd)

Lagenaria siceraria

The plant

Dudi or bottle gourd (*Lagenaria siceraria*) is one of the oldest cultivated crops, having been used by humans for over 14,000 years and has been transported to every part of the tropics in this time.

It is a vigorous trailing or climbing vine with white flowers which open at night and hard-skinned fruits, which are edible when young. When they are mature the fruits or calabashes are hardwearing, decorative and waterproof. They can be made into light, hardwearing cooking or water-carrying utensils, musical instruments, bird-houses or other items. Similar to pumpkins in cultivation, they require a sunny, sheltered site, and only a moderately fertile soil. They need plenty of water in the growing season but hate wet feet so avoid very damp soil.

A thriving dudi plant can climb to over 12ft, so they need plenty of room and a solid support!

Varieties and plant material

In the West, dudi is cultivated as an ornamental gourd, and so attention is given to cultivars with spectacular necked or swollen fruit shapes, rather than eating qualities and although all cultivars are non-toxic, some are better flavoured than others. In the East and in parts of Africa, dudi is a valuable food source so the long thin cultivars, similar in shape to a large marrow, are preferred, being easiest to prepare. The young shoots are sometimes eaten in curries.

Skin colour varies in mature fruits from golden yellow and orange through browns, pale creams and mottled greens. There is a limited range of cultivars around in the UK but seeds sold as 'Calabash Gourd' or 'Snake Gourd' often turn out to be this plant.

Planting and site

Dudi isn't fussy about soil – in fact a less fertile plot is an asset because it restricts the vigour of the vine – but it does appreciate a moisture retentive soil in hot dry weather as the large leaf area becomes dehydrated rapidly in hot sun.



Ideally fill a trench with half-decayed leafmould or coarse municipal compost where you plan to grow dudi, during the early spring, in the same way as you would prepare a trench for runner beans. You could also use the old potting compost from last season's container plants or hanging baskets.

The best place to grow a dudi is in full sun, sheltered from strong winds. Like courgettes or pumpkins they need to be started off indoors and transplanted when all danger of frosts is past.

They perform well over an archway or pergola if it's strong enough, or a stout framework made of posts no thinner than 5cm x 5cm/2 x 2in.

Sow two seeds to a 10cm/4in pot of general-purpose compost in May, in the airing cupboard or in a propagator and discard the weaker seedling. They need at least 18°C /65°F to germinate but will emerge quicker if the temperature is higher.

Harden the plants off as soon as they have two or three true leaves, as they will rapidly outgrow a windowsill, and plant out once the temperature outside is warm enough. Don't panic if there are a few cool nights shortly after transplanting – just cover the young plants with horticultural fleece or even newspaper overnight. Established plants are surprisingly resistant to cold once they've got their roots down.

If you want to grow dudi in a pot, it'll need to be the biggest you can find – at least 40cm/14in diameter – and only one plant to a grow-bag. If growing in containers, feed weekly once the plant starts to flower, using comfrey liquid or a similar potash-rich feed (as tomatoes.)



Pests, weeds and diseases

Dudi is relatively free from problems, although slugs are fond of young plants. The mature leaves have a distinctive scent as well as being slightly furry, which repels pests.

Like all cucurbits they are liable to powdery mildew in humid summer conditions, with dry roots and warm moist air. If mildew develops, soaking the roots regularly with water and removing the worst affected leaves often helps, as does as a seaweed feed to improve the plant's immune system.

In cold wet weather the furry leaves trap moisture and can develop a grey rot or patches of mould (*Botrytis*): again, remove the worst infected leaves, and thin out the shoots or train them far apart to give the maximum air circulation around the plants.

Dudi's rampant growth squashes all weeds in their path, as well as other more desirable plants, so keep them restrained by snipping off tendrils or tying in rigorously every week.

Harvesting and storage

Pick dudi when young and tender, anywhere from 15-18cm/6-8in long, and keep picking to produce new fruits, just like a courgette plant. They will store in the salad tray in the fridge for about a week to ten days but are best eaten fresh.

Dudi doesn't freeze well because of the high water content, so any surplus should be used in chutney or dhal or distributed to friends. Fruits become tough and inedible when mature, and once a plant has set a single fruit which has ripened it will die: so if you want to have seeds for next year, you will need to set an extra plant to grow seed rather than for eating.

This leaflet is produced as part of the Sowing New Seeds Project. This is funded by Big Lottery's Local Food Fund and has produced a resource of information on growing advice, experiences and seeds to promote growing of exotic produce in the UK.

For further information visit www.sowingnewseeds.org.uk
or email sowingnewseeds@gardenorganic.org.uk

Fund for the
Environment
& Urban Life
THE DRAM FOUNDATION, INC.

The Brook Trust

The Sheldon Trust

Local
Food

LOTTERY FUNDED