



Karela from India – Sanjay



Description of area

Sanjay has lived in Balsall Heath all of his life, his parents having come from New Delhi in 1948. Obtaining Indian food was difficult initially and was only available in a few shops.

Background to Sanjay

Sanjay has always taken an interest in growing. He works at the Balsall Heath Forum, where they provide advice and resources to local residents from a wide range of nationalities to grow their own food.

“There’s Bangla kodu, which sells a lot to the Bangladeshi people, the Pakistani people are starting to buy it now as well”

Crops grown in the region

Sanjay has grown many crops for the Asian communities in the area including kodu, dugi, karela and keera cucumber.

“My family comes from India, they came here in about 1948. Then times were very hard to get Asian food and veg. Once a week vegetables would come in, you’d get what you can and that’s it”

Growing Karela

Karela is a bitter gourd that is important in Asian diets. In hot climates it grows wild in the hedgerows, whereas in the UK it needs to be grown in a glasshouse or polytunnel.

“They’ve got tinda which comes from India and Pakistan, you’ve got keera which is a cucumber, comes from abroad, you’ve got dugi, which people call callaloo, pak choi, naga chillies, karela, water melons, that’s some of the stuff I’ve been growing”

Growing and using Karela in the UK

Karela or bitter melon has an important place in Asian cooking and has important health benefits.

How to grow

Crop details: Cucurbit: seed. Time to harvest: 15 weeks after sowing. Grow with other cucurbits in rotation. Needs a polytunnel or glasshouse. Size: Moderate–Large

Growing timeline: Sow indoors Early May, Plant out Late May, Harvest July–October.



Sow

Karela has hard seed, and soaking the seed beforehand can help with germination. It needs warm conditions. Sow 2 seeds to a small pot, 1 cm deep.

Grow

Transplant out when the plants are 5 – 10 cm tall, into a frost free glasshouse or polytunnel. Plant at a distance 50 cm apart. Plants will need sticks or strings to climb up. Pollinating by hand will help ensure better fruit set. Take a male flower (on a longer stalk with no fruit) and rub it on a female flower (have small green fruits behind them).

Harvest

Harvest the karela when they are at least 5 cm long and still green. It can be difficult to get them to grow to a large size in the UK.

Cook

Karela is very bitter when raw. It needs to be peeled then sprinkled with salt and left for at least 20 min to extract the bitter juices. A popular way of cooking it is to scoop out the middle and stuff with cooked onions, chopped tomatoes and spices, then sautee.

