

Growing Cucumbers in the Top End

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SOWING SEASON

Cucumbers can be grown throughout the year. However, during the wet season insect pests and diseases thrive due to the hot humid conditions. These are difficult to control as protective sprays are washed off the plants by the frequent showers experienced at this time of the year. Long green varieties are better suited to Top End conditions. Apple varieties lack resistance to mildews, resulting in a very short cropping period during the cooler dry season.



SOIL PREPARATION

Adjust pH to about 6.5 with agricultural lime where necessary. This is broadcast over the soil prior to digging the area over. It is important to build raised beds or hills (15-20 cm high) in the wet to facilitate drainage. Any available compost or well rotted animal manure should be incorporated in the planting stations at the rate of a bucket per square metre.

FERTILISER

A high analysis fertiliser mix, especially high in phosphorus such as 14N: 14P: 12K should be applied at the rate of 70 g/m² along the rows or hills a week or so before planting. This should be lightly worked into the top 10-20 mm of the soil. Using a 50:50 mix of urea and potassium sulphate the plants should receive a side dressing of 20 g/m² (approx. 10 g per planting station) when the runners are 30 cm long. This should be repeated after the first fruit has set.

PLANTING

Cucumbers like most vine crops take a lot of space in the home garden. This can be overcome to a certain degree by training the vines over a low trellis or fence. Plant three to four seeds (0.5-1 cm deep) per site at 30-40 cm spacings if trellising; otherwise double this distance. Rows should be 1-1.5 m apart.

WATERING

Cucumbers require abundant moisture for rapid growth and good quality fruit. Avoid wetting the leaves as this encourages attack by fungal diseases. This can be done by either using drippers or basin irrigation. Mature plants with developing fruit require daily irrigation.

MANAGEMENT

Seedlings should be thinned out to one plant per station after they reach the two-leaf stage, by pinching out the weaker plants.

Planting three or four stations at monthly intervals should ensure a continuous supply of cucumbers for the average family.

Mulching between plants helps control weeds and reduces moisture loss by evaporation as well as keeping the soil cool and encouraging earthworm activity. It also ensures cleaner fruit.

INSECT CONTROL

The main pests are leaf eating beetles, ginger ants, aphids and caterpillars. These can be controlled by using an appropriate insecticide.

Take care when using insecticides once flowering has commenced as they are often toxic to bees.

For information on insect control, please refer to the DPIFM Entomology website at <http://pestinfo.nt.gov.au/>

DISEASE CONTROL

Cucurbit crops in the Top End are frequently attacked by mildew diseases, which if allowed to continue unchecked, can lead to crop failure. Attacks are often worse in the wet season, but also occur in irrigated crops during the dry season. There are two main types of mildew:

1. Downy mildew is brought on by warm humid conditions. The symptoms are yellow spots forming on the leaves between the veins, which dry out into angular shaped brown spots, often with a grey down underneath, due to the masses of spores which spread the disease. Control is achieved by a weekly spray of a preventative fungicide and should cover both sides of the leaves to be effective.
2. Powdery mildew affects most cucurbits and is generally prevalent in dry cool weather. It starts off as circular white powdery spots under the leaves near the centre of the plant and soon spreads over the whole vine, leaves, stems and stalks. Control can be achieved by two sprays seven to 10 days apart at the first sign of the disease and should be repeated if further outbreaks occur. A rotation of different types of fungicides needs to be used to prevent the build up of resistance. For more information contact Crops, Forestry and Horticulture Information Service on (08) 8999 2357.

HARVESTING

The first fruit should be ready for picking about five to six weeks after planting. Frequent picking is important to prevent losses due to over-sized fruit. At the same time, cull all diseased, over-ripe and odd shaped fruit. Fruit allowed to over mature on the vine causes a slowing down of growth and production of further fruit. Fruit ripening during hot weather will not go dark green, but tend to be yellowish in colour.

STORAGE

Wrapping cucumbers in plastic film or packaging in plastic bags prevents wilting during storage in the refrigerator. Cucumbers packed in this way will remain in a fresh condition in the refrigerator for up to three weeks.

Note: All pesticides are subject to registration in the Northern Territory. It is the responsibility of the user to use only pesticides which are registered for the purpose at hand. **READ THE LABEL CAREFULLY.**

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