

# The world in an allotment

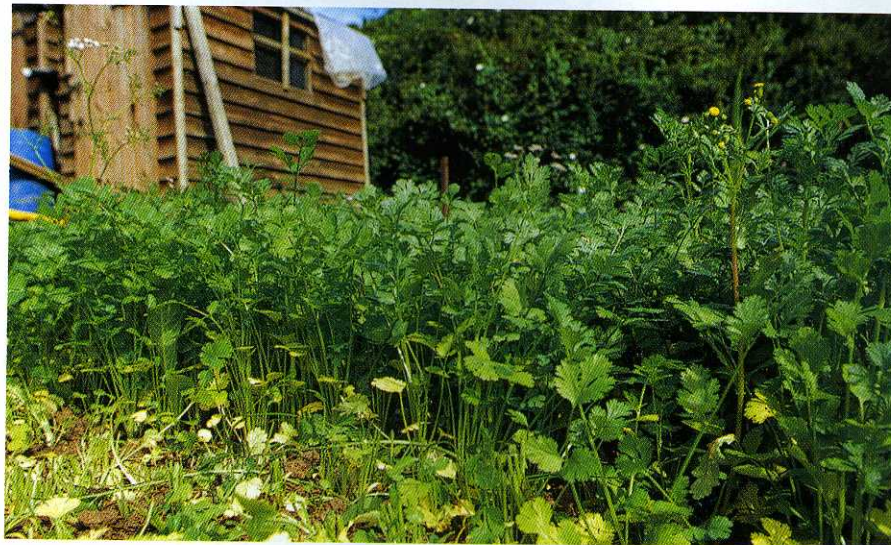


Britain's cultural richness is demonstrated vividly by the many and varied food plants different communities grow in gardens. Nowhere is this more apparent than on allotments, as MICHAEL MICHAUD describes

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL MICHAUD

Maria Batty (left), from Galicia in northwest Spain, with the cidra or fig leaf gourds (*Cucurbita ficifolia*) she grew in her Worksop allotment, along with the bean 'Asturia' (above) which is grown for its fat white seeds

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**Peppers by Post** offers half-day classes on growing peppers (covering both chillies and sweet peppers) at: Sea Spring Farm, West Bexington, Dorchester, Dorset DT2 9DD; 01308 897892; [www.peppersbypost.biz](http://www.peppersbypost.biz)

• Open day: 20 August 2006, 10:30–4pm

Sadiq Mohammed, born in Pakistan but now living in Bristol, uses his allotment to grow 'kadu' (above left) a type of courgette, and pungent coriander (above) essential in his family's cooking

**M**ODERN BRITAIN has a multicultural population that reflects both its colonial past and its European presence.

Even the smallest rural towns now have Indian and Chinese restaurants, while the most cursory of searches often reveals the presence of Polish, American and Italian immigrant families settled into the UK.

Typically, gardeners from these communities like to maintain their traditional ways of eating. Though they patronise shops catering to their culinary needs, they also grow their own fresh produce, either on allotments or in their gardens at home.

### Diversity on the allotment

Reflecting the make-up of the population, allotments of differing cultural groups show great diversity through the crops grown. Though many gardeners grow some fruit, it is vegetables and herbs that wield the most influence on their cooking and make their gardens important centres of plant diversity. Using what these gardeners find in Britain, they cultivate much the same as anyone else; regulars include runner beans, spring greens and thyme.

What sets some plots apart is the exotic fare unfamiliar to the rank and file of the UK gardening fraternity. Adding a distinctive touch are strange species like bottle gourd (*Lagenaria siceraria*) and water

spinach (*Ipomoea aquatica*), as well as exotic cultivars of better-known species such as cucumbers and tomatoes. Through trial and error, the exotics that fail to grow under British conditions are eliminated while successes become garden regulars.

The foundation of most vegetable plots tended by many cultural groups are plants with an annual cropping cycle. Included among these are not only true botanical annuals but also biennials and perennials that can be sown and harvested within the same growing season. These 'annuals' are propagated by seed, which is often, in time-honoured practice, saved by the gardeners themselves. In principle, seed saving from the garden is a simple technique that involves collecting mature seeds from older plants, making sure they are dry and then storing them. It is not, however, as straightforward as it seems – timing can be critical, and the seeds that are saved do not always breed true.

Despite problems with seed saving, it is sometimes the only way favourite crops can be maintained. When it proves to be impractical, gardeners employ other tactics to get hold of what they need. Stocks of seed, for example, are frequently brought back

from the mother country or donated by friends or relatives, while an ever-improving selection is sold by British companies. Ethnic food shops are often unwitting suppliers of valuable propagating material, such as coriander (*Coriandrum sativum*) and fenugreek (*Trigonella foenum-graecum*) seed, sold as culinary spices.

### Enriching a long tradition

Gardeners from Britain's multicultural communities are a mix of the old guard, novices just starting out and everyone in between. Despite differences in experience, they all have one thing in common: their determination to maintain a part of their traditional way of life through gardening and cooking.

They are a vital part of Britain's gardening richness, have been instrumental in demonstrating the diversity of vegetables and herbs that can grow here, and must be commended for all they have added to Britain's gardening heritage.

The case studies on the next four pages profile four such gardeners. ▀

**MICHAEL MICHAUD** is a culinary ethnobotanist studying food plants