

BRIAN'S COUNTRY DIARY for October 2007

Achocha! No, not a sneeze but a quirky plant from South America that provides abundant edible seed pods. How do you pronounce it's name? Truly, I don't really know, though as it's either Spanish or Native American in origin I guess that an imitation of a sneeze might be pretty close to the mark.

I grew it in my garden this year having obtained some of its large black oblong seeds, with a peg on one of the shorter sides, from Garden Organic's Heritage Seed Library, of which I am a member. This organization was set up to safeguard for the future heirloom vegetable seeds, which were in danger of disappearing for good. It now cares for over 800 varieties of these, and as a member I get to receive seven packets every year.

I was intrigued to read about achocha, which was described as being a trifold of a plant, ready to take over if you let it. Certainly it is a big plant, but it never threatened to overrun the place. I did live in fear of being raided by the drugs squad, as its leaves are uncannily like those of the cannabis plant. I hasten to add that it is no relative, instead being closer to the cucumbers and squashes.

It's abundant tiny greenish flowers seemed very attractive to hoverflies and other small insects, so it is readily pollinated. The fruits were green, oval shaped with a distinctive kinky tail at the distant end, and are well hidden in the dense mass of foliage. They finally ripened to a creamy yellow, and were about four inches long. Described as tasting like a minty cucumber, the long anticipated moment to try them arrived. I was slightly disappointed to find that they had a flavour like a mild cucumber.

The green pods may be eaten raw in salads, or lightly cooked in stir fries. The mature ones need to be sliced open lengthwise, when it becomes a somewhat fiddly job to remove the black seeds which are as hard as roof tiles and just about as tasty. The pods may then be stuffed and roasted, or steamed with other vegetables. I have also used them in my home-made soups.

There is no doubt that they have their uses in the kitchen, and the plant is at least a talking-point while it is growing. But they are too similar to other vegetables like the courgette to have much of a future. In fact if the courgette had an upright growth habit it would get my nomination as a garden Trifold.

Out in the wider countryside the three of us have been busy harvesting the wild fruits that I wrote about last month. The wild apples are suitably scabby and have been cooked and frozen for pies in the winter. We found blackberries a disappointment, ripening too rapidly, but we did gather sufficient to add to some of the apple pies. The over-ripe fruits proved to be a magnet for butterflies. Whilst picking them we were surrounded by clouds of red admirals, tortoiseshells, small and green-veined whites, and even a comma or two. Gathering sloes for wine we came across a good supply of bullaces. These are thought to be the first stage in the domestication of the sloe, on the route to producing first the damson, and finally the black-fruited Czar plums. Unlike the oval-fruited sloe, the

bullace is round and at least twice the size. Where it occurs in the wild it is often on the site of a long-forgotten orchard, as is the case at Gloucestershire's Robinswood Hill, one of my former stamping grounds