

THE YEAR-ROUND POTAGER:

Courgettes

Vigorous plants with an oh so generous nature, make sure you squeeze one or two courgette plants onto your plot this summer. To be honest, that's probably all you'll need!



Step-by-step guide: Courgettes

1 At this time of year you can either buy courgette plants, or sow from seed. Seedlings will grow quickly if the weather is warm. Because young plants are quite large, either sow into large modules or individual pots approximately 9cm in diameter. Fill the pot or module with seed compost, water well and allow to drain.

Courgettes are one of the easiest vegetables to grow, and they'll reward you with ample and continuous harvests throughout the warmer months. As long as sufficient sunshine, food and water is given, you can grow these plants anywhere – in a large pot, two to a growing bag (the Kakoi Uni-Grow gives a better rooting depth Kakoi 01256 896 301, kakoi.co.uk), or directly in the soil – all will yield well. There are numerous varieties to choose from, with either dark, mid, or light green fruits or, as with this example, bright yellow. The classic elongated shape is a traditional choice, but why not try round courgettes, too, which are brilliant for stuffing? Throw scallop-edged patty pan summer squashes into the mix, and you've a brilliant medley to choose from.



3 Once sown, water your seeds in lightly, label with the variety and date, and place in a propagator. For germination to be successful, the pots need to be kept moist, and at a steady temperature of 18°C or above. You may find that in June temperatures are naturally at this level, but to be safe use a heated propagator if you have access to one, as this will ensure even and rapid emergence.



2 Sow one seed per pot/module, pressing it gently into the compost so that it sits approximately 2cm below the surface. It's often recommended to sow the seeds on their edge to avoid rotting, but in practise this problem rarely happens. It is more important to ensure that your seed isn't old as their viability quickly drops, leading to poor germination.



4 Given warmth, your seedlings will emerge in approximately one week. Once they appear, remove them from the propagator and grow on at a temperature of approximately 15°C in good light. Once the roots fill the pot, gradually harden your young plants off.

5 Your courgettes can either be planted in a weed-free spot in the garden, in a growing bag or in a container. The pot needs to be large (courgettes are vigorous, thirsty plants) so choose one at least 30cm deep and wide. Fill with good-quality multipurpose compost.



6 You can add a little slow-release fertiliser at this stage – incorporate it thoroughly into the compost. Tease your plant out of its pot and position in the centre of the container. Alternatively, plant two per standard-sized growing bag, or in the garden, and on the allotment 1.2m apart.



7 Firm plant(s) in gently and water in well. Due to their large leaves and prolific cropping, courgettes require a lot of water throughout the growing season. To make this easier you can sink an upturned plastic bottle beside your plant, or create a well in the compost around the plant's base.



8 Label your plant and ensure it is in a sunny, sheltered spot so that bees are encouraged to visit and pollinate the flowers. If you've not added slow-release fertiliser to the compost it's important to feed your plant(s) regularly with a good, balanced liquid fertiliser.



9 As your plant grows it will become more reliant on you for feed and water, so pay close attention to this. Initially male flowers will be produced (these don't have a courgette behind them) then female ones, which do, will begin to appear. Regularly harvest these as the fruits swell to a suitable size for cooking.



10 Remove courgettes from the plant using a sharp knife and, unless you are growing a spine-free variety, clothe your arms to avoid scratches. Tend to and harvest your plants daily, and cut fruits as soon as they are ready because if allowed to grow on they'll inhibit further courgette production.

Step-by-step guide

FIVE OF THE BEST:



■ **'Defender'** This vigorous hybrid variety is a classic green courgette shape. Its real benefit, though, lies in the fact that its breeding makes it extremely early, prolific and disease-resistant. If you only have room for one variety, make it this one!

Thompson & Morgan 0844 573 1818, thompson-morgan.com

■ **'Floridor'** Fancy a change from long, green-skinned courgettes? 'Floridor' couldn't be any more different. The bright yellow skin is incredibly eye-catching, and the spherical shape of the fruits makes them ideal for stuffing as well as more conventional use.

Kings Seeds 01376 570 000, kingsseeds.com



■ **'Climbing Black Forest'** If you like standard green courgettes but want to experiment with your growing technique, why not try this variety? It has a distinct climbing habit, so can be trained up trelliswork, an obelisk, cane wigwam or a sturdy fence.

D.T. Brown 0845 371 0532, dtbrownseeds.co.uk

■ **'Romanesco'** This Italian favourite produces classic 'zucchini' fruits – a flecked green skin with light green, ribbed stripes on long, tapering courgettes. A bush variety that is both vigorous and productive, with a distinct taste.

Mr Fothergill's 0845 371 0518, mr-fothergills.co.uk



■ **'Piccolo'** Another eye-catching variety, this bushy plant produces egg-shaped courgettes that are striped dark and light green. Either pick at 5-6cm long for tasty summer squashes, or leave to grow to 12-15cm long, when the fruits then make ideal vessels for stuffing.

Marshall's 0844 557 6700, marshall's-seeds.co.uk