

Growing Shark Fin Melons

Cucurbita ficifolia

The plant

Cucurbita ficifolia is a tender perennial in the cucurbit family, grown in a similar fashion to most other squashes. Despite its common name, the Shark Fin Melon, the fruit is used as a vegetable. It gets its name because the strands are scraped out and made into a broth resembling the texture of shark fin soup.

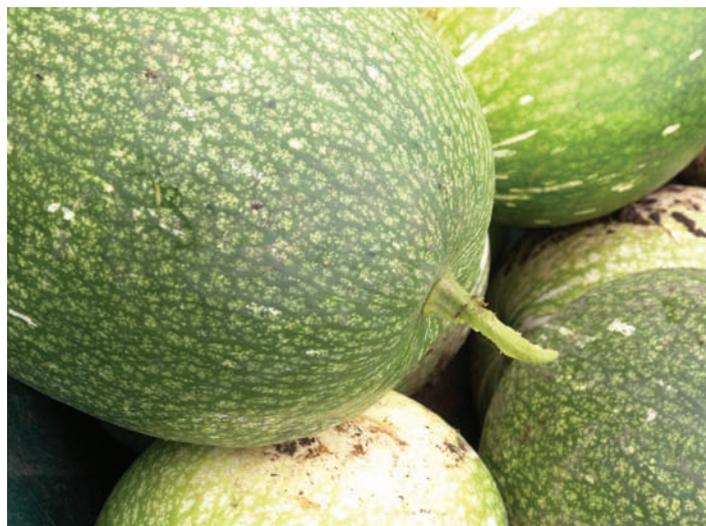
The plant is widely used both in Asia and in Southern and Central America where it goes under many different names including Chilcayote (Mexico and Central America), Chila (Peru) or Sambo (Ecuador).

Varieties and plant material

At present, there seem to be few seed catalogues in the UK stocking this plant. We currently have a limited supply that we obtained from a Vietnamese couple as part of the Sowing New Seeds project and hope to bulk up supplies if it is successful (and first indications are that it is very successful!) If you ask us nicely, we may be able to let you try some, but as we have limited amounts, we would like to know how it grows, and get some seeds back at the end of it. Don't grow more than 3 or 4 plants unless you have a lot of space and know you really like shark fin melons.



Plant out of control – beware!



Planting and site

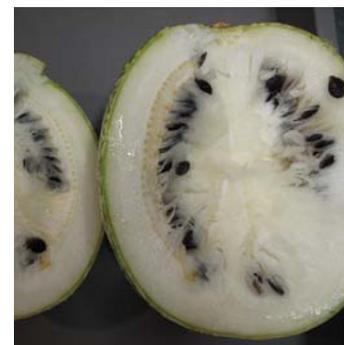
Shark fin melons can be grown outside, but like all other cucurbits, they are not frost hardy. Sow into small pots at the end of April, and transplant to the final position at the end of May, or when you think there is little risk of frost in your area. From our experience, shark fin melons are best grown on a soil that is not too high in nitrogen. Planting out on an over-rich soil makes them produce copious amounts of foliage. Plants should be given generous spacing – we would suggest 1-2m apart, to allow them space to trail. As with squashes, they should be watered in well, but subsequently, they will still produce good yields on a

Pests, weeds and diseases

Our observations suggest that they really aren't troubled by much. The foliage growth is vigorous enough that they require very little weeding except perhaps during the period shortly after transplanting to allow them to get established. As with all cucurbits, red spider mite can be a problem, but they did not seem to seriously depress yields. Towards the end of the season, the leaves may become infected with powdery mildew, but not to a greater extent than any other cucurbits, and respectable yields can generally still be achieved even when the leaves are quite heavily infected. Shark fin melons are more resilient to virus infection than other cucurbits so less likely to succumb to cucumber mosaic virus.

Harvesting and storage

Pollination does not seem to be a problem, and you will find fruits start to set fairly rapidly after the formation of the first female flowers. The fruits start off as a pale lime green swelling beneath the base of the female flower. As fruits ripen they turn mottled dark green with white stripes, and swell to the size of a large rugby ball. We harvested 4-5 large fruits per plant weighing





*Above: young fruit forming,
Below: a mature fruit – not to scale*



3-4kg each. Shark fin melons are treated like a winter squash, and harvested at the end of the season when they are mature. They will keep very well (several months, and reportedly over a year) in a cool, dry, frost-free place over the winter.

Preparation

Shark fin melons are most commonly cooked in a soup. The flesh is eaten without the rind and has a very pleasant mild flavour with flavours of both melon and cucumber: once cut into strands and boiled, it has a gelatinous texture, which is supposed to be similar to shark fins. Some people advocate boiling it with the rind on, removing this at a later stage to prevent the flesh from disintegrating.

Saving seed

Saving seed is easy in all respects. Shark fin melons are a different species (*Cucurbitita ficifolia*) to most other squashes commonly grown on allotments, which are mostly *Cucurbitita pepo* so you have very little risk of them crossing with other. Each fruit will give you a large number of seeds, certainly more than the number of plants you would ever want to grow next year. The fruits do require at least a few months to allow the seed to mature – mature seeds should be black, not white or tan. Leaving them in a warm place will speed this up. Scrape out the seeds when mature, and clean all signs of flesh from them. Seeds that are flat and float easily are not viable. Leave in a dry place for 24 hours to dry out, finally store in a cool dry place.