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Zucchini Zone

By Susie Iventosch



Zucchini flowers in the early morning

Photo Andy Scheck

It's that time of year when gardens are burgeoning with zucchini – from fingerlings to the size of watermelons! But, still, the fact that our gardens are plentiful doesn't always translate to, "Oh, Mom, can we please have zucchini for dinner tonight!"

Remember when you hid your kid-sized portions of zucchini in anything close at hand—a napkin, a pocket or a pair of socks?

Over the years, I've discovered that no matter how enthusiastic I may be about our homegrown zucchini, the kids aren't buying it. Luckily, there are still a few ways most kids will eat this prolific vegetable.

Zucchini is actually rather nice stuffed with cheese, onion and garlic, or grilled with olive oil and balsamic vinegar. At our house, we hide the green stuff in pancakes—savory zucchini pancakes, while the Scheck family of Moraga makes zucchini pizzas on the grill. Both recipes make a delicious side dish to accompany any meat, or can be a meal all by themselves.

"We came up with this recipe because we had way too many zucchini in the garden this year," said Amanda, the Schecks' resident teenager. "I named the dish 'zucchini pizza' because the large round zucchini with all the toppings looked and smelled like the Boboli pizza I eat."

Amanda pointed out that she prefers her zucchini pizza with just Parmesan and soy sauce, because she doesn't care for the tomatoes adults are prone to putting on theirs.

Even though zucchini seems easy to grow, from time to time, gardeners do have trouble with their crop. When Lamorinda Weekly publishers Andy and Wendy Scheck discovered their zucchini beds were not happy last year, they consulted with Kenny Murakami of Moraga Garden Center.

"Kenny told me that zucchini have different female and male flowers," Scheck said. "Even though both flowers appear to look the same, the female flower is attached to the actual

zucchini, while the male flower has only the pollen."

Scheck said that due to a reduced honey bee population in his garden, Murakami suggested he pollinate the flowers manually by carrying the pollen from the male flower to the female flower using a Q-tip.

"This has to be done early in the morning, because the zucchini flowers show only early and close when the sun stands high," Scheck pointed out.

Sure enough, Murakami told me the bee shortage, caused by Colony Collapse Disorder, or even cooler summer weather that reduces bee activity, can make hand pollinating necessary in order to grow zucchini.

"You must strip the petals off the male flower and shake the anther, (the male part that holds the pollen), in the center of the female flower," he instructed. "It's best to do this early in the morning, because the male pollen loses its viability as it ages and it has a life span of just one to two days, in any case."

If a garden has lots of bee-attracting flowers, the bee shortage may not be as much of a factor, according to Murakami. He also indicated that there are several other reasons a gardener may have trouble growing zucchini, including "blossom end rot" and incorrect watering—either too much, or not enough.

Murakami did emphasize that for the most effective hand pollinating, the gardener should don a black and yellow striped shirt before heading out in the morning!

Scheck must have been wearing his bee suit, because this year they have zucchini growing out of their ears! Given the season can last well into October or even November, he's going to be making a lot of zucchini pizzas on the grill.

Zucchini Trivia

- Zucchini is actually the plural of the Italian zucchini, a diminutive of zucca, meaning marrow
- In France, Great Britain and New Zealand, zucchini is commonly called "courgette", meaning a small squash or gourd
- Zucchini, Cucurbita pepo, is a member of the cucumber and melon family
- Zucchini is a good source of Vitamins A and C
- Due to high water content, zucchini is best steamed or cooked without added water
- Store zucchini in plastic bag in crisper drawer for up to five days
- Color varies from nearly-black dark green to yellow and may even be striped

Trivia sources:

- http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/Zucchini
- http://homecooking.about.com/library/weekly/aa081400b.htm
- http://homecooking.about.com/od/foodhistory/a/zucchinihistory.htm

Scheck Family Zucchini Pizza

INGREDIENTS

- 1 large zucchini (or multiple smaller)
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- Several leaves of fresh basil
- Parsley or oregano
- Sliced pepper jack cheese
- 4 sweet 100, or cherry tomatoes, cut in half

DIRECTIONS

Cut the zucchini in 4 equally thick slices, or if the zucchini is big enough cut it in 1/2-inch rounds. Spread the minced garlic on the slices. Chop or snip basil, parsley or other herbs and distribute on slices. Place sliced pepper jack cheese on top, and decorate with tomato halves. (Pepper jack has enough spices and salt so you don't need to add any.)

If you have a cast iron plate for your grill, heat it up to 400°F and spray it with a little bit of olive oil spray. Place the zucchini on the grill and cook for about 15 minutes or until the cheese starts to brown slightly. You may also use your oven at the same heat. Oil a flat pan and place the zucchini on it. Bake for 15-20 minutes until the cheese turns brown.



Zucchini pancakes

INGREDIENTS

- 5 cups zucchini, grated (approx. six medium-sized zucchini)
- 1 small red onion, grated
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- 1/2 to 1 teaspoon sea salt
- 1/2 teaspoon ground black pepper
- 1/2 teaspoon paprika
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/2 cup flour (white or whole wheat)
- 1/2 cup seasoned breadcrumbs (can make your own by crumbling toasted bread)
- 3 eggs
- 1/2 to 3/4 cup milk
- 2-3 tablespoons butter or olive oil for frying

DIRECTIONS

Grate zucchini on the larger side of hand-held grater, or use grating tool on food processor. Wrap zucchini in cheesecloth or a kitchen towel, and ring out the excess liquid. Peel and grate onion. Place both zucchini and onion in large mixing bowl. Add garlic, salt, pepper, baking powder and paprika. Mix well. Stir in flour and breadcrumbs to integrate with zucchini. In a small separate bowl, beat eggs with fork, and add milk. Pour liquids into dries and mix well. Drop by large spoonful onto greased frying pan or griddle. Pancakes should be roughly 3-4 inches in diameter. Sauté at medium-high heat until cooked through and golden-brown on both sides. Serve warm as side dish or as a meatless entrée, garnished with freshly grated Parmesan or a dollop of sour cream or crème fraîche.



Another favorite garden recipe the Schecks enjoy in summer is their cucumber salad.

Cucumber Salad

INGREDIENTS

- 1-2 cucumbers
- 1 lb. plain yogurt
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- Chives
- Black and hot red pepper
- Salt

DIRECTIONS

Cut the chive into a bowl and add the yogurt, oil, a little bit of salt, ground black pepper and hot red pepper and mix. Peel the cucumber and slice it into the bowl with a banjo cutter. Mix well and let sit for 5 minutes. Add several Sweet 100 cherry tomatoes on top before serving.

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