

# Return of the Zucca Melon

SHARON REMPEL AND CUYLER PAGE – First published December 1990 and December 1992

**Sharon writes:** Why would anyone want to grow a 120 pound squash? For candied peel. From 1934 to 1955, the Zucca melon was an important crop in Oliver, Summerland, Osoyoos and Keremeos, British Columbia. The seed and plant are the subject of a number of local stories, and to the great delight of many southern BC people, the Zucca has returned to the valley. However, the return has not been simple.

For the past three summers I have been searching out the agricultural past of the Similkameen and the Okanagan Valleys. I work at the Grist Mill in Keremeos, an 1878 provincial heritage site. The twelve acre site houses a two storey water powered flour mill, as well as a number of beautiful heritage gardens planted with vegetables, fruits, flowers and herbs of the past. We also grow and harvest heirloom varieties of wheat. We tell the story of milling history, milling technology and the history of the settlement of the valley, including the agricultural history of the area.

When the war prohibited the importation of citrus peel, the Zucca melon took its place. The Okanagan's long hot summer was ideal for the growth of this African gourd. Zucca seed was smuggled into Canada from California. Agriculture Canada's Summerland research station has several articles on the Zucca. Apparently, F.E. Atkinson obtained seed from a friend in 1938. The first crop of Zucca was grown the following year in the valley. Earlier that year, Wm. Robinson Ltd. of Vancouver obtained some seeds from an unknown source. They sent these to Associated Growers in Vernon who sent them to the Osoyoos Cooperative. They were then given to Mr. Gummel who grew them in his garden. Apparently, his first effort failed due to the difficulty in germinating the seeds. The seed is dark brown, has two distinctive "handles" on one end and is about the size of a regular pumpkin seed.

The Zucca, *Lagenaria siceraria*, is a member of the bottle gourd family. It originated in Africa and was later brought to Italy where it grew on the slopes of Mt. Etna. It was fondly called "Cucuzza." The distribution of the seeds has always been carefully guarded. They were also used as a medium of exchange - a good milk goat was worth ten Zucca seeds. How they came to North America will probably remain a mystery.

Mr. Glenn Swenson from Sandwich Illinois would have been a wealthy man in the days of Zucca bartering. He seems to be the last person maintaining the Zucca melon. I obtained his name from the American Gourd Society and my letter of request was promptly answered with two packs of seeds. I am now a wealthy woman with



Women making zucca into candied peel

two dozen seeds in my possession! Next summer, the Zucca will have a place of honour in the Grist Mill gardens. In a couple of years, the local fair will have to add a Zucca category to its show.

Seed germination began in a rolled up damp burlap sack, in early April. Each viable seed was gently transferred to a paper collar filled with a mixture of peat and sand, and was grown at 70 degrees F for 6 weeks. The young plants were then transported outdoors under hot caps, spaced 25 feet apart.

The fruits weigh 60 to 120 pounds each. They've been described as a cross between a vegetable marrow and a hippopotamus! People who have loaded the fruits onto trucks maintain that they are as slippery as a hippo and have used the term "greased pigs" to describe them.

Growers stood the melons up on end to make them easier to find among the massive leaves in the field. These harvest melons were stacked like cord wood onto trucks and shipped out by train or truck for processing in Penticton, Osoyoos or Vancouver.

The melon's usefulness for the candied peel industry came from its tasteless and colourless flesh. Harvest took place when the melon skin could be dented with a fingernail and the skin popped. An axe was used to split fully ripe melons. The outer rind was peeled off with a spokeshave, the seeds removed and carefully saved. The flesh was cut into strips like giant haddock fillets. These went through a dicing machine and were then treated with sulphur dioxide. Finally, colour and spices were added.

The going price of unprocessed fruit was \$25/ton. It was a big business - in 1942 over 700 tons of the processed product were shipped out of the area. This "peel" was shipped across Canada to fill fruit cakes.



Zucca stacked in Osoyoos in the '40s

The Zucca melon story is really remarkable. The reintroduction of this old variety is possible because a dedicated grower kept the seed alive. Many wonderful old varieties of fruits, vegetables, grains and flowers have died because their seed guardians did not pass along the seed. We are very fortunate with the Zucca.

So, when you bite into your Christmas cake this year, pause for a moment and think of the story of the Zucca melon. Make a resolution to find an old gardener in your area and adopt a variety or two from their collection. Share the seeds with friends and with the Heritage Seed Program. Start a seed swap in your area and discover your own special local heirlooms and their stories. These old favourites could be genetically important one day. Meanwhile, they can add diversity and colour to our gardens and plates.

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**Cuyler writes:** The Zucca melon is actually a bottle gourd, *Lagenaria siceraria*, native to northern Africa. It was grown commercially in California and later in southern British Columbia to provide material for the making of candied peel for Christmas fruit cakes. Because of its colourless and tasteless qualities, the inner bulk of the Zucca was used as an extender in the jam industry.

Zuccas were grown as a major commercial crop in the southern Okanagan and Similkameen valleys of British Columbia from the late 1930s to the early 1950s. Thousands of tons were shipped out to canneries in Vancouver and the Okanagan. The long hot summers of this near desert region met the special needs of this giant but delicate plant. However, because of its size and rapid growth, the Zucca is very consumptive of soil fertility, so other crops such as turnips replaced the Zucca in the food industry. There was never a reason for home gardeners to grow them since varieties such as the English Vegetable Marrow were better suited to the conditions of backyard gardens and the available space in home kitchens.

The Zucca provides a perfect example of the vulnerability of plant species to extinction, and the need for seed saving programs. Today, much attention is given to the current extinction of native species in rain forests and elsewhere in the natural environment, but by dividing attention between the so-called natural and cultivated worlds, and by focussing on the dramatic issues of massive deforestation, the loss of cultivated varieties has been largely unnoticed, even in agricultural areas like our valley. The Zucca was once so common as a cash crop in the Okanagan and Similkameen valleys that it was taken for granted. When it ceased to be of commercial value, all attention was placed on the new items, shifting with the fashions of

the times.

The loss of the Zucca was not a concern to anyone until we began to develop a series of interpretive heritage gardens at the Grist Mill historic site near Keremeos, BC. Each bed was to represent one era in the history of agriculture in the Similkameen valley, planted with the appropriate varieties to form a living museum. We realized the scarcity of some varieties and intended to manage the plantings as part of the historic collections management policy of the site.

This picturesque plant was so famous in the region that it appeared at first to be a simple matter to contact the former growers to ask for a few seeds, assuming that surely someone would still have some. It turned out that no one had any seeds - none at all. There were lots of stories, many photos and smiles all around at the mention of the Zucca, but not a seed to be found. We contacted national gene banks to no avail. Contacts with former growers in California and with gene banks in England produced no seeds either.

Sharon Rempel, gardener at the Grist Mill, went to incredible lengths to try to find some seeds, or even anyone who might know about them. She finally succeeded through the agency of the American Gourd Society. Mr. Glenn Swenson of Sandwich, Illinois did indeed have some seeds and was delighted to share them with us. He had been growing the Zucca in his back yard for 30 years as part of his collection of gourds. They were not easy to grow in his area and, as far as he knew, no one else in North America had a Zucca. The excitement was great, and even the CBC radio jumped in to share our joy at finding some seeds by connecting Sharon with Mr. Swenson, patching the phone lines for a live conversation during one of their programs.

A small handful of seeds arrived at the Grist Mill in mid-summer of 1990. They were carefully treasured until sprouting time in Feb-

ruary of 1991. Started in the home kitchen and later moved to the site's Tea Room, only four of the six seeds germinated. Following recommended seed saving strategy, only half of the available seeds had been planted, leaving another six in case of massive failure. A mini hot tray was built for the young plants to keep their feet warm, encouraging growth in spite of the unseasonably cold, wet spring.

The plants were not moved outside until mid July due to the poor weather. A single bed 25 feet in diameter was prepared for the strongest plant since the growers of old described 25 foot spacing as typical in their commercial acres. A hot box of large framed windows was constructed around the plant to keep it warm. It looked very much like a Victorian glass garden construction, fitting in well with the century old buildings of the site. The remaining plants were given to a neighbouring commercial market gardener, Ian Walters, diversifying the plantings in hopes that one of us might have some success.

All the plants produced fruit. The one at the Grist Mill produced ten Zukes for a total of 590 pounds. The largest was 96 pounds and 42 inches long. Ian's plants had similar results. The mature Zukes are pale green, almost gray, about a foot in diameter, smooth skinned and rounded at the ends, making them very difficult to hold. The best way is to grab one with a big hug and hold on for dear life while hoisting it to your shoulder. It has been pointed out that today's Workers Compensation Board rules would probably require mechanical means to lift the big ones!

The most challenging part of growing the Zucca is getting it to pollinate. They need lots of heat. Male flowers were produced in abundance, but no females appeared until the 21st of July. These were immediately hand pollinated but the later flowers managed to achieve pollination on their own. However, due to the lateness in the growing season, the final fruits did not have viable seeds.

After the first few frosts, we allowed the Zuccas to mature indoors for a few weeks before collecting the seeds. We wondered each day if there was the potential for future life waiting within the collection of jolly green giants propped around the walls of the exhibit room, and it was hard to be patient.

Germination tests in January indicated that only one gourd had viable seeds - the first one pollinated. Some 800 emerged from the depths of that Zuke.

About 100 requests for seed poured in from all around the continent, from Yellowknife to Texas, California to Georgia and Nova Scotia. I sent out an adoption letter to everyone describing the requirements of the plant, and happily sent seeds to the many

who replied. Throughout the summer, we heard from some of the adoptive parents about the progress of the Zukes. Now, in the fall of 1992, our regional fairs are having Zukes entered for exhibit, accompanied by storyboards about their history. I wonder how the others are doing across the continent.

I should add a few words about the plant itself. The Zucca is one of the most sensual plants I have ever known. The leaves, over a foot in diameter, look prickly and sharply fuzzy, like squash and pumpkins; but when you touch them they actually feel soft and pliable, like a cross between chamois leather and velvet. The plant seems to like to be touched, and there is no scarring left from one's caresses. The flowers are night blooming, appearing at dusk.



Cuyler measures the first zucca, Sharon Rempel photographer

As the sunlight begins to fade, huge white blooms open one by one until there is a glowing veil of white hovering above the deep dark green mass of the plant. The aroma is gentle and very sensuous, making me wish I were a hummingbird moth.

Jack and the Bean Stalk might have been written by someone who saw a Zucca grow. By the end of the summer, the plant had filled its 25 foot diameter bed to a depth of three feet and more. It would have spread to twice that size if we had not taken



Baby kissing zucca, courtesy Sharon Rempel



**Zucca flower**

the axe and pruning shears to it daily to keep it within the bounds we had assigned. I measured the largest fruits each day, and as the season progressed I frequently had the image of disappearing into the vegetable mass and never returning as I climbed in to see how the “babies” were doing.

The Zukes themselves grew at a rate of two and a half pounds each day. A typical vine end progressed six inches overnight. Less than two weeks after pollination of a flower, the fruit was a foot long. Historically, 60 to 100 pounds was common in our area, 120 pounds very large, and 150 pounds the record. In spite of its size, the plant had a very friendly feeling around it. It seemed to make anyone who approached it feel happy. It was never taken for granted!

There is something humorous about the Zucca that makes people want to laugh. Hundreds of photos were taken of visitors standing beside a Zucca we had harvested and stood on end as in the historic photos. (They were stood up when cut from the vine so field hands would know which ones to carry out of the fields.) The Zuke was treated like another family member when a group was arranged for a snapshot. Little children would frequently run up and hug it. I always worried a bit when that happened because the Zuke was often double their weight.

So many people approached us with stories about the old Zucca days, we decided to hold a “Zucca Reunion” at the end of August, hoping to use the opportunity to collect some of the memories from the region. As word spread about it, we even began getting calls from Vancouver, and on the day of the first reunion about 200 people showed up, some coming all the way from the coast for the day!

Speakers shared their experiences with the mighty Zuke, a grower brought his antique home movies of the plants and his children, newspaper articles and old photos all surfaced, and a jolly time was had beneath the shade of a 100 year old chestnut

tree. To celebrate the rebirth of this local treasure, we served up (on a wheelbarrow) a giant Zucca chocolate cake with distinctive Zucca-green icing, and after everyone got a piece there was still some left. Nothing about the Zucca is small.

This year in August we hosted the second annual Zucca Reunion with another cake. Through seed sharing, we now have a growing number of Zucca owners in the region, and next year’s event will be later in the fall to allow a contest and social event for the Zukes themselves. It will be timed to encourage full growth and harvest, allowing contests for size and appearance. We also plan a dress-up contest for the Zukes. This is based on a story shared from the 1940s when some young men apparently arose before dawn to steal four major Zukes from a field for a prank. Later, when the townspeople of Oliver, BC awoke, they discovered a western scene out of the old movies with four Zucca dudes dressed up in western vests and cowboy hats standing across the dirt

main street of town, challenging all comers.

I began to understand why there were so many delighted faces when word spread that we had a Zucca growing at the Grist Mill. Hundreds of people who had known it in the past made special trips from all around the region to see this well loved variety growing again. It was as if they were visiting an old friend, a special friend with whom one has shared the love and joy of life.

I can understand how you might think these descriptions are overdone; but I believe the staff of the site will agree with me in all aspects, for they too felt and enjoyed the friendly attraction of this marvellous plant and saw the daily response of visitors. I do not know what causes these feelings, and I do not really care. I only know that I can hardly wait to plant another in the spring, and that I am very thankful to live in a climate that will support this very loveable Zucca.

The message I like to share with our visitors is that cultivated plants require friends to grow them out and save their seeds. Even if such exotic results are not always evident, the value of preserving genetic diversity cannot be overemphasized. But I am continually surprised by how many visitors now jump in to tell me how important it is to save the old varieties. The message is spreading fast.

The message of the Zucca is once again that the grassroots gardener can be a major player in the important task of preserving genetic diversity. However, it may surprise you and return the love in ways you never expected.

The Zucca melon is currently offered by two seed companies in Canada.

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