

## Interesting Edibles to Grow

By Susan Camp

At the July Gloucester Master Gardener meeting, members were treated to an interesting continuing education program presented by Master Gardener Bob Beyea. Bob's specialty is growing vegetables, and many of you have heard him speak at Second Saturday (now Third Saturday) programs throughout the year at Brent and Becky's Bulbs.

Bob spoke about growing vegetables different from our usual home crops of tomatoes, cucumbers, squash, and fast-growing, giant zucchinis. He referred to a fascinating book called "Grow Something Different to Eat" by Matthew Biggs, lecturer, writer, and BBC radio and television presenter who trained at the Royal Botanic Garden, Kew.

The book includes color illustrations of an array of vegetables, fruits, greens, grains, herbs, and other edible crops, as well as tips and techniques for growing each plant.

If you are strictly a native plant enthusiast, this probably isn't the book for you. Most of the entries are about exotic plants from Asia, Africa, and Central and South America. If you decide to plant any exotic edibles, please research their invasiveness potential before planting. The best research sites include university Cooperative Extensions and botanical gardens like Missouri Botanical Garden and the U.S. Botanical Garden in Washington, D.C. Norfolk Botanical Garden and Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden in Richmond could be especially helpful with information on invasive plants in Coastal Virginia.

I selected a few plants that I found interesting and might consider planting. I found no indication of invasiveness potential for any of these, but I recommend that you always check for yourself when planting new or exotic plants.

Chickpeas (*Cicer arietinum*), also called garbanzo beans, are a great choice for vegans or anyone who enjoys Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, or Indian cooking. Chickpeas are pod-forming legumes that return nitrogen from the atmosphere back to the soil. Seeds can be started indoors or sown directly into the garden after all danger of frost has passed. Chickpeas will grow in almost any soil except clay, and don't require a lot of soil amendment. Very rich soil will benefit the leaves and cause fewer pods to form.

Once established, the plants are drought-resistant. The sweetpea-like flowers are lavender, pink, or white. Chickpeas are high in protein and used in hummus, falafel, and curries, or roasted and sprinkled with paprika as a snack. Leaves can be used fresh in salads. A fun finding was the discovery that the name "chickpea" refers to the small protruding "beak" on each pea.

Callaloo (*Amaranthus tricolor*) is an annual with brightly colored leaves used in Asian, African, and South American dishes. The Jamaican dish called callaloo contains the leaves, which are used much like spinach. It is also grown as a grain crop.

Callaloo is a tender annual that will not survive the first frost. Like chickpea, it can be started indoors or directly in the garden once the soil has warmed. Thin seedlings to 5 to 7 inches apart and remove the flower rosette to encourage leaf growth. Callaloo leaves can be any combination of green, yellow, gold, pink, lavender, purple, red, or burgundy. Callaloo tolerates poor soil and is heat and drought resistant.

Strawberry popcorn (*Zea mays everta*) is a petite variety of flint corn. The plants grow to just 3 to 4 feet. Mature cobs are only 4 to 6 inches long and are covered with ruby red kernels. After harvesting, hang ears in a dry place until you want to use them. You can pop the ears whole, or remove the kernels with a knife, and pop like any other popcorn. The dried ears make pretty table decorations for fall.

Like other corn varieties, strawberry popcorn requires a long, warm or hot growing season. Plant in full sun in compost-rich, well-drained soil. Corn should be planted in blocks instead of rows to increase pollination. All varieties of corn are hungry feeders, so you will have to fertilize your strawberry popcorn plants. Like other corn varieties, strawberry popcorn is an annual.

Grow something different next year!