

Exciting New Veggies & Flowers!

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By gardening expert extraordinaire, Doreen G. Howard.

Cute Cukes Coming to Grocery Stores Soon!

I missed it two weeks ago, but Sainsbury, the largest grocery chain in the United Kingdom, premiered heart-shaped cucumbers for Valentine's Day customers.

The grocery giant announced it plans to start selling star-shaped cukes this summer. A half of one sells for \$1.66, which is equivalent to one English pound of currency. Both shapes have been sold in Japan for more than four years and soon will be available in U.S. stores.



Credit: Courtesy of J. Sainsbury PLC

My first question was, "Is this more genetic tinkering?" Upon, researching, I found it's not. The cucumbers are grown about ten days in clear plastic molds to shape them. Molds are slipped on cucumbers when they are about one inch long. It's best to trellis vines so that rapidly-developing fruits grow straight.

My next question was, "Can I get my engineer husband to make some molds for me?" You can buy them from Japanese sources, but they are \$85 each, plus \$19 shipping! That's a bit steep.

Fruits and vegetables have been grown in molds such as bottles and boxes for centuries to alter their shapes. Renaissance wine makers put bottles over tiny, developing pears so that the pear grows in the bottle. Perry or pear wine filled the rest of the bottle, and it was corked and aged for several months. The resulting drink was bubbly and mild and a favorite of British and French ladies.

I think they'd be a wonderful addition to salads and relish trays to celebrate July 4th this year.

Growing Cucumbers

If this simply makes you hungry for cucumbers, just grow them yourself! The growth of these plants is fast, and the crop yield is abundant if you care for them properly. Go to this excellent [Cucumber Planting and Growing Guide](#).

You can find all the free Plant [Guides for common vegetables, herbs, and fruit](#) on Almanac.com.

New Flowers in Garden Centers Soon!



I'm able to trial the new flowers and plants a year or two before they come to the market. A few I've grown recently are stunners and will be in garden centers in 2011!

In the spirit of full disclosure, plant producers send me their introductions to grow, hoping that I'll write and speak about them. However, I'm a tough sell. My climate is severe, prone to late freezes and summer drought, plus the growing season is short, 100 days if we're lucky. I've grown so many flowers and vegetables that it takes an exceptional plant to impress me.

Two petunias took my breath away. Pretty Much Picasso is a neon pink bloom edged with lime green. It's a traffic stopper! The petunia trails naturally and doesn't need pinching to branch. Plants quickly fill a container or hanging basket with traffic-stopping color. The bi-colored petunia has been available for the previous two seasons, but distribution will be much more widespread this spring. It will be everywhere!



Black Velvet petunia is another attention-grabber. Black is an elusive color in the plant world. Yes, there are black hollyhocks and other flowers, but they have a purplish cast that is not true black. It took four years of breeding to finally eliminate the purple. ♦Black Velvet' is genuinely black and stunning. It's an upright, compact plant about eight inches high and best for edging a flower bed or planted in smaller containers. Try the charcoal-black flower with white, red or orange blooms. A black-orange combo would be terrific for Halloween.

To grow and care for petunias, see the [Almanac's Petunia Page](#).

True blue is another elusive color in the flower world. Yes, there are primrose and pansies that are blue, but they have undertones of other colors, usually purple again. Blue Mystique, a phalaenopsis, is truly blue. The show-stopper orchid premiered in January and was the star of the world's largest plant show, IPM Essen, in Dusseldorf, Germany. Plants are now arriving at local garden centers and florists.



Blue Mystique orchid is already in stores. Photo courtesy of Silver Vase.

This primal blue color sadly wasn't bred; flowers are dyed. When flower stalks start to appear, growers inject a blue dye into plant roots. Buds and flowers are an intense blue. Subsequent flowers from the plant revert to white, without dye injections.

Several true blue primrose were at Essen, too, according to Dr. Rick Schoellhorn, director of new plant development at Proven Winners. They were bred to be blue and will not revert. He says American gardeners will probably see these plants in 2012.



Blue Zebra primrose is one we may see in stores within a year or two. Photo courtesy of Dr. Rick Shoellhorn.