

## Productive Choko Vines – Love Them or Loathe Them?

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*Choko vines take on triffid-like proportions in warm climates. I cannot think of another plant that is comparable in productivity. Growing your own vine is easy. Finding interesting ways to consume the hundreds of fruit these plants produce is quite another!*



### What's In A Name

The choko (*Sechium edule*) is known by various names depending on the country where it is being grown. In the United States it may be known as chayote. In other countries it is known as vegetable pear, popinella, chocho or brionne. Plants are thought to have originated in Mexico.

Botanically, chokoes are members of the cucurbit family, and as such are related to pumpkins, zucchini, squash and cucumbers. Choko vines are perennial, but do tend to die back during the cooler months in the subtropics and in cold or frosty areas. Nutritionally, the fruit are an excellent source of vitamin C.



### Fruit Colour and Shape

Fruit colour varies from deep green through to pale green, yellow or white. Shapes vary from pear shaped to quite rounded. Some fruits are deeply furrowed, while others have spines over the outside of the fresh fruit. Peak fruiting period occurs during summer and autumn.

### Growing Your Own

Establishing a new plant is simply a matter of selecting a good sized fruit and allowing it to mature within the fruit bowl until a young shoot can be seen to emerge. Plant the entire fruit by pressing it into well-prepared soil until about half covered. Avoid completely burying the choko, as this can tend to cause it to rot.



### Upwardly Mobile

Vines need something to climb on. If not provided with a suitable structure they will run along the ground, climb up trees or cover garden sheds and dividing fences. Keep in mind that choko vines are extremely vigorous and the combined weight of the stems, leaves and fruit is enormous. Be sure the structure that supports your vine is up to the task.

### Thinking Outside the Square

The ability of choko vines to completely engulf other plants has been used as a weed control strategy by some enterprising gardeners. If your acreage property is infested with lantana, plant a few vines or throw some choko grenades (chokoes wrapped in wet newspaper) into the worst affected areas. The vines will thrive, eventually smothering the lantana. Of course, the choko vines themselves will have to be removed, but this is less hazardous than being cut to pieces by lantana bushes.

Choko vines remain highly productive for 4-5 years, after which they tend to deteriorate. During this time an enormous tuber develops at the base of the plant. Many gardeners are unaware that this tuber is quite edible. Some would say it is the best part of the plant! The tuber is similar in texture to a potato, although a little more crunchy and can be cooked and used in a manner

similar to the humble spud. As for the choko fruit itself, I prefer to pick them when they are babies. Whole baby chokoes picked when they are 4-5cm in length can be steamed, cooked in the microwave or lightly fried in butter and garlic and served with a little freshly cracked pepper.

**Dessert Chokoes**

In days gone by, chokoes were used as a substitute for stewed apples or pears. Peel, seed and quarter some chokoes, then poach in a little water with sugar, lemon juice, vanilla essence and a few drops of cochineal. The lemon removes the vegetable flavour, while the vanilla is absorbed into the fruit. The cochineal leaves the fruit with a pink tinge. Serve with home made custard and a dollop of fresh cream for the best stewed pears you have ever tasted. Add the sliced fruit to pies or other cooked desserts. They are truly delicious!