

Capers....a crop worth growing

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I have found that many people have never given a whole lot of thought to those tiny green balls that are scattered on pasta, chicken piccata and other Italian dishes. These little olive-green delicacies are known as Capers or *Capparis spinosa*. Depending upon the part of the plant that is used, capers can be considered a vegetable (the edible shoots) or an herb (the processed buds). Most often the part of the caper plant used in cooking is the immature bud picked at perfection and then pickled in brine or vinegar where it is transformed into a prized condiment. Like olives, capers are a processed product that when used in cooking, contributes to a dish by bringing out the flavors of the other ingredients.



The caper plant is native to the Mediterranean area, as well as the tropics. The plant grows about two feet tall and spreading. The vines can be 7 to 10 feet long, and have a very deep root system. The plant is very drought resistant, needs little cultural care, requires good drainage, and is practically free of diseases and insect pests. The fruit is green, elongated, 2-3 inches long, 1/2 - 3/4 inch in diameter, and contains 200-300 seeds. The leaves are oval in shape, leathery and shiny green. The plant is propagated sexually (by seed) or asexually (by cuttings or roots). The preferred method is the latter simply because of the variability found in seed propagated plants.

The cuttings are rooted in the greenhouse for at least one year and then planted in the field, spaced about sixteen feet apart. Mature caper plants are pruned to ground level during November-December. In the spring, tender new shoots develop, which are used as a vegetable and, according to some people, are better than asparagus spears. Buds are picked from mid-May to mid-August. A 2-year old plant will produce some, a 3-year old plant produces just over 2 lbs/year, and a plant older than 4 years may produce over 20 lbs. of buds per year. The unopened buds are picked by hand, sorted into five different qualities based on size and brined in a similar way as cucumbers. The smaller the bud the higher the quality and price.

Capers are grown commercially in Morocco, Spain and Italy. The United States imports more than \$5 million worth of processed capers annually from these countries.

The principal use of capers is as a condiment - in salads or sauces, or with steaks, fish, poultry, or lamb. It is also used to make cosmetics that improve dry skin, and in making certain medicines.

Germinating and Transplanting Seedlings

1. Fill a jar (quart size) with warm water (110-115 F.).

2. Drop seed into water to soak for at least 12 hours. Let water cool to room temperature. No need to keep water temperature at 110-115 F. for the duration of this treatment.
3. Discard water, wrap seed in a moist towel, place in a plastic bag and keep in the refrigerator for 65 to 70 days.
4. Then take seed out of the refrigerator and treat it again as in step #2. No refrigeration necessary this time.
5. Plant about 1/4 to 1/2 inch deep in a soil mix of 50-25-25 parts planting mix, perlite and sand, respectively. Use 6 inch clay pots or deep flats.
6. Water well and keep in a warm area (70-85 F.), in part to full sun.
7. Do not let top of soil crust over. Keep soil moist.
8. Germination should start within 3-4 weeks and may continue for 2-3 months. Not all seeds germinate at the same time.
9. Let seedlings grow to 3-5 inches tall before transplanting. If seedlings are too crowded in the clay pot or flat do not pull them. Instead, use a scissor and cut off the small, less vigorous, undesirable ones. This way the root system of the remaining seedlings is not disturbed.
10. Transplant the seedlings to individual one gallon containers, in the same planting mix as above. When transplanting, disturb the root system as little as possible - try to keep some original soil around each transplanted seedling. Good drainage soil is essential to prevent root rot.

Caper seed is difficult to germinate. The above methods have resulted in 40-75% germination. Seedlings are very temperamental when transplanted. Some may wilt and die. To reduce this loss, transplant with soil attached to the root system, water and cover with a plastic bag immediately after transplanting. Use mature (dark brown-black) seed, one to two years old.

Besides the edible buds and tasty young shoots, the caper plant can also be used in ornamental plantings because of its attractive flowers and foliage. It may also be used to control soil erosion, especially on slopes where irrigation is difficult and soil erosion is more pronounced. So next time you are in the market for a plant and want to try something different and fun, consider the caper.

Contact the University of California Cooperative Extension Central Sierra at <http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.edu> with your agricultural questions. To speak with a Certified Master Gardener: Calaveras (209) 754-2880, Tuolumne (209) 533-5912, Amador (209) 223-6838, El Dorado (530) 621-5512. Information for this article was collected from the University of California Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources.