

# Pumpkins for the people



Peter Chin Kean Choy (above) teaches t'ai chi among rows of pumpkin 'Potimarron'. He urges gardeners to donate some of their crop to homeless shelters and save seeds for friends to grow



Many vegetable gardeners find it difficult to make use of surplus produce, but LIA LEENDERTZ discovers how one man is encouraging people to donate their excess crops to feed the homeless

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID MURRAY

**G**LUTS AND DROUGHTS are an inevitable part of vegetable gardening, as it is almost impossible to estimate exactly how many tomato or runner-bean plants are needed to feed a family. Divination apart, and without an accurate prediction of how weather will affect crops, the only thing that can be relied on is that there will be excesses and shortfalls. Most people err on the generous side, and may spend half the summer bottling, freezing and pickling their harvest, before the time comes to give away their surplus crops; but there are good causes that can benefit.

### Helping communities

Peter Chin Kean Choy, an energetic t'ai chi teacher living in Devon, has chosen to harness overabundance and the benevolence of gardeners for the greater good. He has made it his mission to encourage people all over the world to take a new approach to vegetable growing and to use their gluts to help their communities.

Peter's vegetable of choice is the pumpkin cultivar 'Potimarron'. His scheme is simple: he will send free seeds of 'Potimarron' to anyone who asks. In return, he requests that they promise to track down their local

homeless shelter or soup kitchen and donate a proportion of the fruits to them. The seeds of any fruit they themselves eat must be saved and passed on to other gardeners or returned to him for redistribution. It is a simple idea based on trust, but Peter already has about 1,000 gardeners involved in the UK, Europe and the USA.

This is no real surprise when you meet him in person. Peter is a ball of energy and enthusiasm, and clearly loves his pumpkins. His literature calls them 'a fruit veggie of the heart, body, mind and soul', and he and his t'ai chi groups often practise around the

plants. The word 'Potimarron' is derived from French. *Potiron* means pumpkin and *marron* chestnut: the taste is a combination of both. It is widely grown in France, which is where Peter first encountered it.

He has a great belief in the good nature of gardeners, on which his scheme's success relies. 'Behind every garden is a good heart,' he says. 'All gardeners have a love of the environment, they plan ahead, they are wise. When you see a group of gardeners together it is always friendly and harmonious, but so often they are just patting each other on the back saying, "oh, what a beautiful garden you have". I want to tell them that maybe they can actually do something.'

Peter is most enthused about the idea of feeding people. 'There is a simple solution to the problem of people starving – feed them,' he says. 'People say if you teach a man to fish he will eat for a lifetime, but what if he has no water?' he says. 'Some people have no means and the most simple way to solve the problem is to give them some food. This is the 'Potimarron' revolution.'

Although Peter does have half an eye on solving world hunger, he is most interested in gardeners taking responsibility for local



problems. He takes several 'Potimarron' to his local homeless resource centre, St Petrok's in Exeter, when a new batch ripens. He also includes other produce that is plentiful at the time, as well as a bunch of flowers for the workers. 'Fresh vegetables are expensive,' Peter says, 'and people need to eat them every day. 'Potimarron' is particularly useful because it stores for up to 12 months, so can be left on a shelf until the moment it is needed.'

### Far-reaching effect

Linda Sillifant (left), chef at St Petrok's, says the donation of fresh food has a far-reaching effect. 'We have a budget for fresh food, but the more that is donated to us, the cheaper we can sell it, and the more likely people are to come in. Once they are through the door we can talk to them about their problems and offer them services such as counselling.'

Alex Green from Crisis FareShare, which encourages businesses to donate surplus fresh food to centres for homeless people, suggests that gardeners should contact their local council and ask for a list of projects in the area that will accept food donations.

Peter is delighted that gardeners are taking part in the scheme, and hopes to expand it in different ways. He has helped St Petrok's set up an allotment to grow its own food and is starting to work with schools. Many people seem to find his simple, direct approach irresistible. 'Why wait until you feel guilty at Christmas or harvest time to give food?' he says. 'People are hungry now. Nature is abundant, so come on, let's share it!'

LIA LEENDERTZ is gardening columnist for *The Guardian*

## TIPS FOR GROWING PRODUCTIVE 'POTIMARRON'

Gardeners interested in joining Peter's scheme and growing pumpkin 'Potimarron' should contact him for a batch of seeds.

Peter pregerminates seeds in February or March on damp tissue paper, wrapped in aluminium foil. Kept in a warm dark place they usually germinate within a week. He plants seedlings into small pots, and once they have four leaves, plants them out, at least 1.5m (5ft) apart, into soil enriched with compost or well-rotted manure. Peter suggests gardeners in colder areas grow them in a polytunnel or glasshouse, as fruits need heat to ripen.

Train the large plants over frames **1** to allow light to reach leaves and fruits and to prevent fruits touching the ground, so they are less likely to rot. From April onwards, plants require regular watering **2**. Each

can produce five to eight fruits: stop further fruit production by pruning the plants back, as excess fruits will not reach maturity.

Harvest through July, August and September. Fruits to be stored should be left on the plant until the skins harden. Leave as much stem



on the fruit as possible when it is cut: short stems can encourage rot. 'Cure' fruits for at least 10 days in a warm, dry place **3** and they will store for up to 12 months (Peter and local children draw designs on the immature fruit to produce the decorative scarring shown here).



Gardeners taking part in Peter's scheme need to donate 70 per cent of fruits to a local homeless charity. When preparing fruits for cooking, scoop out seeds and wash them, and leave them in a warm place to dry. Give seeds to other gardeners or back to Peter for redistribution.

