
Living Homegrown Podcast – Episode 133 Growing Fun & Unusual Veggies with Niki Jabbour

Show Notes are at: www.LivingHomegrown.com/133

Theresa: ... you got the ones like Sugar Magnolia that are so beautiful, Sugar Magnolia I grow quite a bit. We do tend to grow it as a shell pea. The pods, the purple pods of fat right up and then when you split them open you've got these bright green peas in the inside. You wish the peas were purple too, but I'll take the purple pods. Honestly it's an Instagram vegetable. You have to grow it if you want to [inaudible 00:00:19] vegetables on Instagram.

Announcer: This is the Living HomeGrown podcast. Episode 133. Welcome to the Living Homegrown podcast we're it's all about how to live farm fresh without the farm. To help guide the way to a more flavorful and sustainable lifestyle is your host, National PBS TV producer and canning expert Teresa Lowe.

Theresa: Hey there everybody. Welcome to the podcast. I'm your host Theresa Lowe and this podcast is where we talk about living farm fresh without the farm and that can include preserving the harvest, small-space food growing and just taking simple steps towards a more sustainable lifestyle. All the different ways that we can live closer to our food even if we have little or no garden space at all. Well, I have a very special episode for you today we're just now getting into springtime. I know many of you are starting your seeds indoors, or you're thinking about your gardens. You're starting to plan and pick what you're going to be planting this coming season. So I have the perfect guest for this time of year and that's my friend Niki Jabbour. Now Niki has been on the show before. She was on episode 80 where we talked about winter gardening but today I'm bringing her back because she has a brand new book all about super flavorful but very unusual veggies that we can grow in our own backyards.

Niki is a veggie growing expert like there is no tomorrow, and she really knows her stuff. And what I love about this book is the wonderful photographs, the incredible different varieties that she had. There were so many that I had not heard of or was not familiar with. And I really, really loved the book. Now I recommend that when you are looking through this book if you happen to go out and get it that you sit with a book in one hand, and your browser open to your favorite seed companies in the other hand because that's exactly what I did. As I was reading through, I was marking, which ones I wanted to get. And finally I said, "What? I'm just going to be placing my order while I'm reading" because I was so excited about a few of these.

Now if you've never heard Niki on the show before let me tell you a little bit about her. Niki Jabbour is an author and edibles expert from Halifax Nova Scotia. In her backyard veggie garden, Niki has 20 raised beds in which she grows a wide assortment of different vegetable varieties, and she experiments with unusual crops like quinoa and peanuts and all the wonderful edibles that she's going to talk about in today's episode. Now in her first book, *The Year Round Vegetable Gardener*, it was honored with the 2012 American Horticultural Society's Book Award, and it's now in its ninth printing with over ninety thousand copies in print. I love that book.

Niki's second book was called *Groundbreaking Food Gardens*. I'm a little partial to this one because my backyard garden plan is in that book. This particular book has 73 plans that will change the way you grow your garden. It tries to inspire people with different ideas of how they could set up their veggie gardens, so I really love that one of course. But Niki's brand new book, which is coming out just this week as this podcast airs, is called *Veggie Garden Remix*. And in this book she invites us to shake up our food gardens with over 224 new, unusual, heirloom and global crops. From amaranth to Indian cucumbers to ground cherries, Niki grows the world in her backyard.

For the last 11 years or so, Niki has been the host of the radio program *The Weekend Gardener*, which is heard throughout eastern Canada on News 95.7FM. Niki's work can also be found in *Fine Gardening* magazine, *Garden Making*, *The Heirloom Gardener*, *Horticulture Magazine* and many other gardening publications. And lastly, she writes about everything that she's up to over at savvy.gardening.com. So in other words if you don't know Niki, you're definitely going to want to know her because she's kind of a garden rock star in our world. So I think you're really going to enjoy this conversation.

As always, I will have in the show notes for today's episode. Everything that we talk about, all of the links to Niki, her Instagram, which you definitely want to check out because it's gorgeous and all of that will be in the show notes. I will also have a PDF download of my favorite seed company catalogs in case, after listening to this you're looking for some new inspiration of where to go buy seeds. So I'll have that in the show notes as well. So to get to the show notes you just go to livinghomegrown.com/133 and everything will be right there for you.

Now before we get started I have one last thing to tell you and that is that this episode is brought to you by my group coaching program Level Up. As you probably know I have several online programs on things like canning, artisan food crafts and organic gardening. But what you may not know is that for the last few years, I've been coaching garden food and wellness entrepreneurs on how they can create their own online digital courses and memberships. And I find that most people in the-farm fresh space have a lot of uncertainty about moving into digital products with one of the biggest questions being, "Am I ready for this?" Now this is totally understandable when you dive into something new. So if you've been considering sharing your own expertise in an online course, I've created something to help you decide if this is the right venue for you. It's a PDF called The Five Signs You're Ready to Digitize Your Expertise. And it has a section at the end that will help you narrow down a good topic for your online product whatever that may be. If you'd like to get a copy of this completely free resource, I have it all set up for you at livinghomegrown.com/free. That's F-R-E-E. You can download it there to get started. So with that let's dive into my conversation with Niki Jabbour of savvygardening.com.

Hey Niki thanks so much for coming back on the show.

Niki: Well thanks so much for having me. I'm so excited to chat again.

Theresa: Well I'm really excited about your new book. First of all the photos were amazing, and I was salivating through the whole thing. But-

Niki: Thank you so much for that. I'd like to say ... I could take full credit for that, but of course it had very little to do with me.

Theresa: Well you did probably grow everything so yeah it does have to do with you. But still I really liked it. And I was super excited to talk about this. This is the perfect time of year to talk about it because everyone is just getting started with their garden, so I know this will be real inspiring. I'm going to tell everybody in the intro that they should have your book in one hand and be logged into all of their favorite seed companies on their computer at the same time because I was tagging and making lists of everything that I wanted to get. So I think this will be really-

Niki: Oh that is awesome. That's exactly what I hoped for when I was writing this book because I'm a big seed nerd and January February March is the best time of the year when you're trying to figure out what to grow. I hope this book will inspire people to try new things.

Theresa: Yes absolutely. I know it well. Well before we get started, why don't we start off in case someone didn't hear you on episode 80 where we talked about winter gardening why don't you tell everybody a little bit about what you do.

Niki: Well I am a gardener and a garden writer and I'm from Halifax, Nova Scotia, which is I guess if you are in New York City, if you drove north for about 12 hours you'd end up in Halifax Nova Scotia. It's perched into the Atlantic Ocean. My province is almost an island, and it is joined to the mainland though. I'm in zone 5, it's B. My backyard garden is pretty sheltered.

In my garden, I have 20 raised beds usually 4 by 8 or 4 by 10. We've got tunnels for beans and cucumbers and gourds and lots of trellising, and a deer fence to keep out all the deer that walk in my backyard every single day. I grow a global vegetable garden. I grow so many different types of things and it is my passion, so I write about it. I write books, *The Year-Round Vegetable Gardener*, *Groundbreaking Food Gardens*, which you contributed to. Awesome.

Theresa: Yes, yes.

Niki: And I still get people asking me about that design all the time.

Theresa: Oh good.

Niki: Yeah I do. And also my new one, *Veggie Garden Remix*. I talk at events across North America, so I go to the Northwest Flower and Garden Show, which is an amazing show. Boston Flower Show, Canada Blooms ... lots of different places to talk. And I'm a member of, a founder and one of the co-owners of savvygardening.com, which won Best Garden Blog in 2017-

Theresa: Yay.

Niki: ... from the association of Garden Communicators. My gosh, what else do I do? I have a radio show for the past 11 years [inaudible 00:09:24]. And that's probably all you need to know about me. I'm an obsessive seed-a-holic and I love to grow food.

Theresa: I love it. I love it. Well I am definitely going to be linking to everything that you talked about in the show notes, but I specifically want to make sure everyone checks out your Instagram because you post a lot of the photos of what we're going to be talking about. And I think people will ... if they're like, "What does that look like?" They can go to your website and to your Instagram and see all the pictures and then of course get your book, so it will be really, really good.

Niki: I was late to joining Instagram because I was like, "Well I'm on Twitter and Facebook. Do I need Instagram?" I fell in love with it. Connecting with gardeners and seeing what they're posting and growing is so inspiring to me that every day I post something on Instagram, and I look forward just to scrolling through my feed and seeing what everybody else is doing too.

Theresa: I know. It's really fun to see what you're posting so I know everyone is going to be really excited to connect with you that way. It's just great because they can see exactly what you're talking about, which is perfect and very seasonal, right in the season. You have all the seasons, lots of snow everything so it's fun to watch your garden go through all the changes.

Niki: Well it's funny as we talk right now, there's a snow storm outside right now. We're getting another six to eight inches of snow today. We got six inches just two days ago. So yes, it's snowy winter wonderland in Nova Scotia.

Theresa: Wow. Well I loved your book and I loved your book, Veggie Garden Remix, right from the start especially because you hooked me in with the story of what made you go down this path of unusual vegetables. So I think I'd love to have you tell that story to start off the conversation because I thought it was great.

Niki: Well I'm so glad. I was hoping that would resonate with people because it means a lot to me. This book is sort of a little bit of a love letter to my mother-in-law, [Noha 00:11:11]. And she grew up in a small mountain village just outside Beirut. If you've ever been to Lebanon, it is very mountainous. You go from the ocean to the mountains in about half an hour and you're so far up and looking all the way down to the ocean.

I got to spend two weeks there this past summer so we got to tour the village and just explore the country and I really get a sense of where my husband grew up and my mother-in-law came from. So she grew up in this village in Lebanon and then she moved to Canada when she was probably about my age now with two young children and her husband. She knew no English. She would go to the grocery store and at that time, the grocery stores didn't even have fresh parsley. So she struggled trying to figure out how to cook in a country where she couldn't speak or read the language with all these unfamiliar foods.

So she would grow a few little things in a small garden but she just figured most of the things that she knew, you couldn't grow in Canada. And so fast forward to about probably 10 years ago now and she was up in our big backyard vegetable garden and I was getting her some tomatoes and some parsley and some cucumbers and she just stopped. And she's like, "What is that?" And she was looking at our big A-frame trellises, these big wooden trellises I have. And they were just covered in this giant foliage from my snake gourds. I grow snake gourds and bottle gourds. I was growing them because they're cool. The kids like to grow them. They get four or five feet long, the fruits. They're part of our autumn decor and Halloween decor and I would take them to the schools and show them off. And she goes, "That's [kuzini 00:12:44]. And I'm like, "Well, no. It's snake gourds." She's like, "No it's [kuzini 00:12:48]." Then she explained to me how in Lebanon they would grow these and harvest them young, like around 10 or 12 inches long and they were like zucchini but very, very tender and almost had a flavor that was sort of like nutty. And I was like, "Okay." At that point the fruits were about the right size for her and so we picked armfuls of them and I sent them home with her.

She cooked us the most wonderful dishes with them, stuffing them and roasting them and oh my goodness, it was so amazing and I'm like, "All right, well obviously we have to grow more of these." But I start to think, "What else could I grow that she might recognize from Lebanon? From what she would have eaten there?" I started to grow things like purslane and I would look for like Lebanese varieties of tomatoes and different types of, Mideast types of cucumbers and I just start to explore, growing zaatar herbs and things like this. Then I was like, "Well, I like Thai food. I like Chinese food and Japanese food. And I love Mexican food. What else can I grow that maybe I can't find so easily in my supermarkets that would help me create some delicious food?" Then I started shopping for seeds globally and the global vegetable garden began.

Theresa: Wow. Yeah. So that started you down the whole road of experimentation, which is really, really fun. I know that's ... One of the reasons why I got into gardening was because I could grow things that I couldn't find in the stores. But as much as I know about gardening, the things that you listed in this book were ... more than half of them were new to me.

Niki: Oh that's exciting.

Theresa: Yeah it was exciting. I might know one particular variety of something but then you'd list six other varieties of a pea, for example, that I'm like, "What? How did I miss this?" It was very exciting. So yes I love that you do this and you even say in the book sometimes it's a great hit and sometimes it's a miss, but it's always worth a try so I love that.

Niki: It's true and for certain things, I can ... I live in Zone Five, so certain things are grown in summer whereas other things will still grow in my winter garden. A lot of the Asian greens are very hardy so I can still winter harvest those. And over the years I'll try to grow things and sometimes it just doesn't work. Certain things though like lemon grass or Vietnamese coriander does great for me in containers on my hot summer deck. So even if you don't have a garden there's still so many ways to adapt food gardening and global food gardening to small spaces.

Theresa: Perfect. Yes, yes. Well one of the things you talk about in the book is you take everyone down this journey and you say, "Why grow this when you can grow that?" So I would love it if in our conversation we could go through some of those things. Would you be up for that?

Niki: Oh my gosh yes. You kidding? That'd be amazing. I could go on all day. I promise I won't but I could.

Theresa: Okay, okay. Let's start off with, why grow tomatoes if you can grow ... what?

Niki: Oh my gosh. Why grow tomatoes if you can grow things like tomatillos and ground cherries Cape gooseberries? And of course in the book too, I focus on some of these tomato cousins but then I also talk about why grow ordinary tomatoes. In my neck of the woods here in Nova Scotia, there is a tomato called Scotia, which is a mid-sized bread tomato that everybody grows and I don't know why because it doesn't taste very good. Having said that aloud, I will get people sending emails yelling at me but it doesn't. It's fine if you want to make ... can them or something, it's okay. But why would you grow an ordinary tomato like Scotia when you can grow something like Snow White or Japanese Black Trifele or Black Zebra or Chocolate Sprinkles or Mandarin Cross or all these other amazing tomatoes we can grow in our garden.

Of course the tomatillos, the Cape gooseberries and the ground cherries and in all my social media, everybody seems to want to talk about ground cherries and these are such an amazing little crop. Have you grown them before?

- Theresa: No I haven't. But I know a lot of people who grow them but I have not grown them in my own garden so I have not tasted them.
- Niki: Oh no. Okay we have to fix that. I'm going to have to like FedEx you some ground cherries [inaudible 00:16:46]. Well you have to grow them because, let me tell you, these guys are amazing. It's one of those things when I bring people up to my garden who maybe haven't seen it before, haven't been in a while, I make them taste things. That's just the rules. People love to taste the cucamelons and everybody has to taste the ground cherries. I always ask them, "What do you think it tastes like?" when they're eating a ground cherry. And I've never had anybody tell me the same thing. It's always different like for me, I think a nice ripe butterscotch-colored ground cherry, it tastes a bit like pineapple. Maybe a little bit of a super-sweet cherry tomato mixed with a bit of vanilla and if you're really lucky, hints of caramel.
- Theresa: Wow.
- Niki: [inaudible 00:17:24] lime and I actually ... we gather up ... I probably grow maybe six or eight plants every year and that's a lot of ground cherries but we turn them in ... We add them to scones to add flavor. And I make a ground cherry sauce for ice cream or cake that is so delicious, it's just unbelievable. So there's so many ways to use ground cherries. Most get eaten out of hand and it's funny. My mother-in-law, when I started growing them five or six years ago, she'd come up to the garden and she would like taste them and she loves them. So this is a woman whose life is dedicated to feeding people because she's a Lebanese grandmother, she has to make sure you eat. But when I give her ground cherries she holds them in her arms and goes, "These are for me." One thing she won't share with anybody is her ground cherries. So I'm like, "All right. These are yours."
- Theresa: That is really, really cute. Yeah, I didn't-
- Niki: [inaudible 00:18:15] hoarding her ground cherries.
- Theresa: I did not realize about the vanilla undertones or overtones with that. That sounds amazing. Yeah. Very, very exciting thing.
- Niki: [inaudible 00:18:24] different things and they taste them but to me that is exactly what they taste like.

Theresa: Wow. Wow. Well that's a good one. That's a good one. I know another one I really wanted you to go through though was, why grow cucumbers when you can grow ... And you had like some amazing things in cucumbers. Some of them I was familiar with and some of them were new to me. So let's talk about cucumber substitutes or different ones we can grow.

Niki: For me ... cucumbers? We love cucumbers. I grow lots of cucumbers, lots of varieties. Unusual ones, heirloom ones, newer hybrids. I'm always testing cucumber varieties but I also love the cucumber melons and things like cucamelons which look like a grape sized watermelon. And people always ask me, "What do they taste like?" I think they taste like cucumbers with hints of citrus, a little bit of lime or lemon to them especially the more mature they are. They get a little more of that citrus tang but they are so delicious and we eat them fresh. I chop them in sauces and I put them in salads and we dip them in hummus and other different types of dressings. But most are eaten straight from the garden because they're so delicious and crunchy and-

Theresa: And they're cute. They're really, really cute. Kids love them.

Niki: People always ask me, "Do you have to peel those?" and I'm like [inaudible 00:19:32]-

Theresa: No.

Niki: Not for me. You might have tried this one because you are warmer than me although I do grow these in Nova Scotia with great success. It's the West Indian burger [inaudible 00:19:44]. Have you tried those?

Theresa: No, I have not done that one.

Niki: Well you're going to have to try this one. They look like spiny eggs. They're pale green and we picked them about egg-size. They will get bigger but at that point they're quite unpalatable. They get quite bitter but when you pick them when they're an egg-size, they are just delicious. Fresh tasting and sweet and crunchy and delicious. You don't even have to rub off the bumps of the spines, you can just eat them as is. They are a real nice surprise to me and I first had them probably five years ago. But we include them in our garden every year now because they're so easy to grow. They're very large vines they do produce large vines. So I put them at the side of my garden and let them do their thing as they meander outside the deer fence. I don't mind them going wherever they want but that is a really fun one to try the cucumber melons.

- Theresa: Yeah. I think you even had ... you have a lot of ... like a whole section on less bitter cucumbers like the lemon cucumbers. That's something that my kids always have enjoyed. So you had a couple I think of the white ones.
- Niki: Yeah, those are the white cucumbers. Generally the white or the pale yellow cucumbers seem to have less bitterness, which is the most probably frequent complaint about cucumbers. "Why are my cucumbers bitter?" Generally it's because of inadequate or insufficient water. You need to put a lot of moisture to your cucumbers and because I don't want to use a lot of water in my garden, I mulch really well after I plant my seedlings in the springtime so that they don't dry out so frequently but mulch well even watering. That will help prevent bitter cucumbers. But so are picking the right variety. So growing things like Dragon's egg, [Blues 00:21:12] by blonde, crystal apple, lemon. These ones tend to be far less bitter than some of the more traditional green, oblong-shaped cucumber. So these are really fun to grow.
- My goodness Dragon's egg? If you have children or grandchildren or you're a kid at heart or you watch Game of Thrones, definitely try growing Dragon's eggs because they're so smooth and they really are pale white. They look like an egg that's about four inches long and three inches wide. It's so cool.
- Theresa: Yeah, they absolutely do. That's so funny. People could do a whole Game of Thrones garden with like the Dragon tongue beans and things like that.
- Niki: Oh yeah.
- Theresa: In fact-
- Niki: [crosstalk 00:21:46]-
- Theresa: Yeah. Exactly. Oh that's really fun. Okay so let's jump to beans since I just mentioned it. You have some great beans. I think most of them I've grown or tasted and I loved growing these with my kids, a lot of the unusual colors. So what are some of the beans that you really like?

Niki: I love so many kinds of beans. In the book when we talk about why grow this when you can grow that and all that sort of stuff, for me other types of bean-ish plants would be things like chickpeas. When you go to the markets in Lebanon in the summer ... And the markets are basically stands outside of these little convenience stores a lot of the time. And it's ... All the fresh local produce that's available is piled up in these wonderful boxes just outside the storefronts. You look at these giant piles of these plants like, "What are these things?" It's like these two-foot long plants that are totally uprooted. The roots are there. They're bundled together and you're like, "What are these?" They're chick pea plants.

And yes, eventually chick peas do get grown to maturity and dried and processed for using as hummus and other types of dishes but chickpeas are also eaten like shell peas in Lebanon. So, when we grow our chickpeas we pull up all the plants generally at around the same time. They get piled in the middle of a table. We all gather around the table, sometimes there's some beer or sometimes there are some other things to drink, and everybody just ... you take a plant and you pull off all the little pods and you squeeze the fresh green chickpeas into your mouth. It's delicious and it's one of those family traditions that I love doing every year.

Theresa: That sounds like fun. I love that. I love that now chick peas, do they grow tall or do they grow as more bush-like, bush bean?

Niki: Yes exactly. More like a bush bean. Probably around a foot and a half tall at most and they have beautiful foliage. Very small leaflets. It's great for containers as well. I mean it's not one of those plants I can grow enough of to dry them from all the chickpeas that I would use in the course of a year, but we grow them as shell peas so that we can eat them like you would shell peas or beans. And oh my goodness they're so delicious. But I also grow [inaudible 00:23:42], which is another sort of bean-type plant because [inaudible 00:23:45]mommy is one of my lovely, lovely treats. I just ... I cannot get enough. I absolutely love boiling [inaudible 00:23:50]. But then of course there's lots of other bean suggestions. So why grow ordinary varieties when you could try some of the different ones?

And of course you mentioned Dragon's tongue, which is an amazing bean. I grow it as a snap bean. And then I do always let probably half the crop mature so we can grow it as a shelling bean and then my mother-in-law will cook those into this wonderful sort of bean stew with tomatoes and all these herbs from the garden. I don't know what she puts in it honestly but it's delicious.

Theresa: It sounds good, yeah.

Niki: And I love it. And then things like Red Swan is a more recent hybrid. It is a gorgeous burgundy-ish kind of colored bean. That's a bush bean, really productive great meaty flavor. Things like French Gold is a pole bean. [inaudible 00:24:31] is a pole bean and Gold Marie is an heirloom yellow bean with, you know, it's one of those types and I'm sure you've grown these. They're long pole beans but they're very flat and white. Oh my gosh. They're so delicious. They have become I think my favorite bean the past couple of years.

Theresa: Ah that's great. That's great. Well I started growing Dragon Tongue because of my boys. I have two boys who are now teenagers, but at the time, we started growing things that just had great names because-

Niki: No shortage of those right?

Theresa: Yeah exactly. And then when some of the things we grew like anything that had a ... like the Dragon's Tongue has ... it's green with streaks of purple and they loved that. You even said in the book that people should know that when you cook them, the burgundy color disappears. Well my kids loved to watch that. So I would boil the water. I would have the ... anything that was a purple bean, that's a snap bean that changes color, I would have them all ready and then we dump them in. And you watch them miraculously change back into green bean when you cook it.

Niki: We call them magic beans. My kids loved it too. Actually I'm still fascinated by it. I stand there and watch them as they turn because it's so fun.

Theresa: It is. It absolutely is. Well another one that you had some great colors in were, the different peas that you had in the book. So talk to us about that.

Niki: Well I mean you think, "Okay, peas, peas. Everybody grows peas. What's so exciting about peas?" But there is such diversity and variety especially through the heirloom seed catalogs. But there's so much work going on in the peas. One of my favorites I think I would have to say is Magnolia Blossom, which is a funny incredible pea that's a snap pea. So generally you're going to eat it pod and the immature peas. So you can pick it up a beautiful snap pea. And then if you let it get a little more mature, the pods have this purple stripe that appears and runs down where the string is.

You can wait and let them mature and save the dried beans for soups if you like or ... and then they also produce these tendrils. You're probably familiar with what tendrils look on pea vines but these are hyper tendrils. So they're producing these fist-sized tangles every tendril and you're like ... I mean it looks so interesting on the plant and they're so ornamental with the little purple flowers and the bright green peas with the purple stripes down the string side and then these hyper tendrils. You can take off those hyper tendrils and add them to your wraps and your sandwiches. You can put them in your pastas, in your stir fries or just eat them in the garden like I do because they taste like fresh spring peas and they're so delicious. So to me that's one of the more interesting ones to grow, Magnolia Blossom. I love it.

Theresa: I love that. I didn't ... I was not aware about the tendrils so that is really cool. I love when we can eat different parts of the plant and you do talk about that on some of these. It's just so fun when you're not wasting any part of the plant. Sometimes you can have the beet greens and people don't realize you can eat the beet greens but they're great. That's fantastic. Yeah I love that one.

Niki: Yeah, even the kohlrabi. It's one of those things somebody tweeted out to me yesterday about kohlrabi and I was like, "Don't forget. Eat the leaves." Because yes you have that delicious stem. But then the leaves are really good too.

Theresa: Yes exactly, exactly. And there was one purple pod ... green. It was green peas were on the inside but there was purple pod on the outside. It was absolutely gorgeous.

Niki: Yeah. There are so many great purple peas right now. Royal Snow is a wonderful hybrid. You've got the ones like Sugar Magnolia that are so beautiful and ... Sugar Magnolia I grow quite a bit. We do tend to grow it as a shell pea. So the purple pods all fatten right up and then when you split them open you've got these bright green peas in the inside. You kind of wish the peas were purple too but I'll take the purple pods and ... you could pick the pods. Well they're purple and slender for like ... for a snow-type pea for stir-fries or cooking but when they fatten up and then you've got the green peas peeking out from that deep, deep purple pod, it is so beautiful. Honestly it's an Instagram vegetable. You have to grow it [inaudible 00:28:25]. I always do vegetables on Instagram.

Theresa: I love it. I love it. Yeah that's really good. Well let's talk about some of the leafy greens because you had a great selection of leafy greens that you listed out. What are some of your favorite leafy greens that we should be growing?

Niki: Well I know most of us think of leafy greens for the spring garden and the fall garden. For me I go into winter as well, but summertime is one of those times when salads change from leafy greens to more like tomato salads or other food-based salads. But there are so many leafy greens you can still grow in the summer that are heat-tolerant. So for me I'm trying to get people to think differently I guess about what they grow. A lot of people are shy about unfamiliar vegetables but some of the vegetables that were not so familiar within North America, are staples in other countries and of course are eaten all the time things like amaranth.

I grow quite a few different kinds of amaranth. I grow purple amaranth and green amaranth and vegetable amaranth and I grow some just for the tassels like Love Life bleeding. It's so beautiful and Elephant Head and ... there's so many cool ones to grow but they have edible leaves. The leaves I treat them like spinach so we can pick them and eat them raw or I pick them and I'll cook them. I'll stir fry them with a bit of garlic in olive oil or I'll add them to my "spinach and artichoke dip." It's more amaranth than artichoke but nobody knows and it's delicious. So I love amaranth for that reason.

And if you're growing it as a plant that you want to have a lot of foliage from for eating, I just shear it back quite often and that encourages the plants to thicken up and branch out and then you've got this just endless supply of leaves from usually for us, early June until October. So I mean it's something that just keeps on giving.

Theresa: It does, it absolutely does. And you had some really nice selections in your book. I know you photographed them and put them on your website and in your Instagram. I grew some ... a whole variety of different ones I don't even off the top my head know the names, but I groom in my front yard because of the ... some of them have Burgundy foliage that is absolutely drop-dead gorgeous. I let them get really tall and they were absolutely beautiful but something you had in your book, which I had not considered, which I thought was such a great idea was popping the amaranth grain or seed, which I thought was such a great idea. And I'm like, "Oh my gosh I hadn't even thought of that." So that sounds like fun.

Niki: So fun. And I mean if you do it with your own, for me in Nova Scotia maybe it's two out of five years or every third year where I can mature the amaranth grains. It's just ... our fall is all of a sudden turned wet or cold and the grains rot. So for me I grow amaranth mainly as a leaf crop but every once in a while we get the grains and of course you can buy them from the stores as well and popping them is so easy. So fun. It's great to watch. And they taste delicious.

Theresa: Yeah so do you just pop it in a pan with a little oil?

Niki: Yes.

Theresa: Yeah. Okay.

Niki: Yes, you don't have to add oil at all. Okay. Well, just put like a tablespoon in a hot pan and then get yourself a little screen on top because they pop quickly and they pop far sometimes. And you don't really want to get them in the eye. But it's so fun. I mean it's amazing how much one tablespoon will pop up and the kids love it and then it's just this healthy delicious snack that you can kind of [inaudible 00:31:35] on. It's really fun.

Theresa: Yeah I'm definitely going to try that because I was like, "Oh what a great idea. I hadn't thought of doing that." So definitely going to try that one.

Niki: So fun. And there's another green in the book that I love and my daughter who is not a gardener although she loves to wander the garden to look for the bees and the butterflies and that sort of stuff, she really loves Magenta Spreen. And that is something a lot of people haven't heard of but it's available in catalogs quite easily. It's related to quinoa. And it grows probably four to five feet tall really. Although I do tend to shear it back so I can have lots of leaves. But this plant is so beautiful because you've got the silvery-green leaf clusters. But at the center of each cluster is like iridescent, hot pink, magenta. It's so pretty and my daughter will take off one of those little clusters and rub it on her cheeks and it's like natural sparkles. She'll put it on her arms and all the kids will play with the sparkles. I mean you eat the plant as is like that. In fact the sparkles are high in calcium so it's really good for you. But it's something that's really fun to grow for kids or just fun to grow because it adds so much color to your salads.

Theresa: Wow. No yeah, I did see the photo of that and that was one that was definitely unfamiliar to me. So does that one just grow in full sun just like a regular leafy green?

Niki: Yup heat-tolerant, loves the summer weather. Again, related to quinoa so I grow it just as I would amaranth. And of course I've got all the instructions in the book. But it's just ... I plant it [inaudible 00:32:55] after the risk of frost has passed and it grows so quickly that within weeks you already harvesting the leaves. And it will continue to produce until late in the season. It will eventually produce these tassels that you can keep cutting off, which I do to keep the leaves coming but it'll produce them. They're not very flamboyant but it does produce some interesting silvery green tassels towards the end of summer.

Theresa: Okay. Okay good. Well let's talk a little bit about the edible gourds because that got you started down this path. And I know one that you listed as an edible, which was so funny because I had never thought of it. And that was Loofah. Loofah gourds. And I was like, "Wait a minute I've only thought of loofah as growing them." And is such a hassle to turn them into one of those sponges that you use in the bathtub. But it is a big pain. But everyone needs to do it once just so they can say they've done it. But it is a big hassle but it was really cute what you said about them. You said, "If you're going to grow these they're pretty but they're bossy." And I thought that was really good description.

Niki: You know what? It is a good description of a lot of the [inaudible 00:33:58] gourds really even the [inaudible 00:33:59]. They're vigorous plants, let's say, and they can take over an area. But yeah, I grow my loofah gourds as well as my bottle gourds on these big A-frame trellises I have and so it keeps them under control. But there's a picture in the book or two of a mature loofah gourd as well as the little baby ones, which are the size you'd want to eat. Because again, I'm in Zone Five and I was trying for years to grow these for sponges. Sometimes I'd be successful but usually they would not mature enough for me to keep them for sponges so we just started eating them young because I read somewhere years ago you can do that. So now they're this delightful kind of like a zucchini-ish vegetable that we'll eat in midsummer when the fruits are produced. It doesn't take long for once they flower to go from flower to like four to five-inch long little loofah gourd. You take those off and you can stir fry them, you can add them to curry, you can cook them in so many ways. And they're just such a delightful vegetable that you can't buy. I can't buy a loofah gourd at my farmer's market or my supermarket or even my Asian food market. So it's something that I have to grow if I want it.

Theresa: Yeah exactly. And that's the whole reason why we start doing this, why we get down this path. So what's one of your other favorite edible gourds?

Niki: Oh my goodness. I really like the bottle gourds, which ... I think they're probably the easiest to grow. And they kind of will grow about a foot, maybe a little longer than a foot. But we try to pick them when they're about say 9 inches to 12 inches. They're just a bottle shape really. They're produced on these again, vigorous bossy plants but they do produce quite a few.

One thing I have done, again being in Zone Five, a colder climate, is I hand pollinate. So once the flowers start coming, the interesting thing is unlike cucumbers or pumpkin or squash, these flowers open at night. So instead of going up in the morning and doing hand pollinating I'll go up in the evening before the sun sets the powers have just opened and I'll pop off a boy flower and I'll pollinate the girl flowers. I show you how you can tell the difference in the book but it's very easy to do takes a minute to pollinate probably 8 or 10 flowers. Then it's pretty much a guarantee that all those flowers will be pollinated and I'll have a whole bunch of bottle gourds.

Theresa: Yeah that's good. I love that. I love that you're telling everyone exactly how to do it. Tell everyone what happens if it doesn't fertilize. How do you know that it didn't fertilize?

Niki: Well this is a problem for a lot of zucchini as well, especially early on. Sometimes you'll get all these little fruits coming and then they just start to rot off. That's what would happen to the bottle gourd. So it'll still produce the female flower. You still see that immature fruit and you think, "Okay well I've got a fruit. It's coming" but then it'll start to rot because it wasn't pollinated. And then it will fall off. So you end up with no fruits. So I find if I'm in the garden in the morning, which I am almost all the time in summer and I see a bunch of new cucumber flowers opened, I'll just hand pollinate. Takes just, again, moments to do and it just ensures that I'm going to have a big crop whether again it's squash, cucumbers, gourds ... Whatever it is, if I see something that I can hand pollinate I'm going to get in there.

And that's a lesson too for the kids or other people to come to the garden because most people don't really think about that. We rely on the bees and we're lucky to have a decent bee population but I think Mother Nature's helping hand doesn't hurt. The actual creatures that would normally pollinate bottle gourds in their indigenous countries in Asia or India, I don't have those creatures here. We do have some night moths but they would not do an adequate job. So by me hand-pollinating them, I'm ensuring I will definitely get a good crop.

Theresa: Yeah I'm glad you were able to explain that too because I think a lot of people, exactly like what you said, you see the little tiny fruit and then when it kind of rots and falls off they think they have a disease or a problem and it's it could really just be a pollinator problem. And that's one of the reasons why we are always trying to encourage the beneficials. But in this case I didn't realize that they opened at night so that is a very important skill to have to do the hand-pollinating. So that's good.

-
- Niki: And one of the gourds, the snake gourds, their flowers are so beautiful. They're very, very intricate and they look almost like lace. They're so beautiful. So it's worth growing for ... to see the flowers in late afternoon, evening as well, especially if you have them near a sitting area because they're so gorgeous. They're just so pretty.
- Another plant I grow from my mother-in-law- she started growing these years ago- it's a type of cucumber melon, circling back to cucumber melon. So botanically it's a melon but it's eaten like a cucumber and it's called mekti. And I know I'm mispronouncing that because I cannot pronounce it the way that my husband or my mother-in-law would. Mekti. It's a cucumber but it's a type of Armenian cucumber and it's just pale, green, fuzzy green fruits and I have to grow those for them every year lots and lots of them.
- When she first came here and got some seed she couldn't grow them here. She said the plants can fine, lots of flowers but we're too cold in Canada. I thought if they've got flowers and fruits by mid July we're not too cold. So I realized we didn't have the insects to pollinate them. So I grow those as well and I hand-pollinate those and I get incredible crops of these wonderful mekti-type cucumbers.
- Theresa: Wow I wouldn't have even thought of that. That was very clever you figured that out. Yeah.
- Niki: My only moment maybe.
- Theresa: Well as we're closing up here, what would you suggest to somebody if they're like, "Okay I'm going to add three new things to my garden." What would be your top three picks that someone should start if it's something kind of different?
- Niki: I would try a new type of green because it's so much fun and there's such diversity with greens. I don't know if I could just pick one though. I think I would try maybe something like amaranth. It's really fun but if you're a big lettuce fan there's some beautiful Asian greens like Tokyo Bekana, which is a wonderful lettuce-like green that's super fast and easy to grow. That's a great one to try.

Also, of course I've got to say ground cherries because they're so delicious and everybody loves them of all ages. They're very prolific plants. They're super easy to grow. They're a little promiscuous though so remember the next year wherever you planted them, you'll have a bunch of babies popping up. So dig them up and move them somewhere else. Throw them in your compost or share them with friends because they do tend to recede quite easily.

And then of course, I think I have to say cucamelons because I'm such a supporter with my love of cucamelons because they're so fun to grow. They're so delicious, that lovely cucamelon crunch and they grow up. They grow on delicate-looking vines but they'll grow in every direction and they produce such a heavy crop of these yummy cucamelons. I just love them they're so much fun to grow.

Theresa: Yeah. The vines are actually a lot stronger than you think. You even mention that in your book. So-

Niki: Yes.

Theresa: ... yeah that's really good.

Niki: It looks very delicate and they need the heat. So I don't put my melons out until about a week after our last frost. And sometimes I maybe wait an extra week depending on what the nighttime temperatures are because it's like basil. A lot of people tell me they can't grow basil. It always dies for them but you're rushing it. So you're in a rush to get everything out in spring but you don't have to rush certain crops. They'll catch up and they really need the heat. So wait to put your cucamelons out until we've had some reliable, good, long stretch of warm weather and then they'll really take off.

Theresa: Great tip. I love that. Okay. Well Niki, I know my listeners are just going to be drooling over all these descriptions and all your wonderful information. So thank you. Thank you so much for coming on the show and sharing all these new to us edibles. So thank you very much.

Niki: Thank you too for having me. You know I listen regularly anyway but you've become such a storyteller. I've been tuning into every episode because I learn so much and I get inspired from all your guests and from you in your own garden experiences so, thank you.

Theresa: Aww thank you so much.

Well I hope you enjoyed that conversation with Niki Jabbur of savvygardening.com. I really love all of the things that she talks about in her book and on her Website. These incredible, incredible varieties. Sometimes we can kind of get in a rut when we're gardening and we end up just growing the same things all the time and that can be really boring. So I invite you to change it up this year and add in a few more unusual varieties that maybe you've never tried before. So remember, everything that we talked about all of the links to everything about Niki, her books and the PDF download that I have for you of my favorite seed catalogs, are all in the show notes for today's episode. So all you have to do is go to livinghomegrown.com/133 and I'll have everything there for you.

So that's it for this week. Thanks so much for listening and tuning in. And until next time just try to live a little more local, seasonal and homegrown. Take care.

Announcer: That's all for this episode of The Living Homegrown podcast. Visit livinghomegrown.com to download Theresa's free canning resource guide and find more tips on how to live farm-fresh without the farm. Be sure to join Theresa Lowe next time on The Living Homegrown podcast.