

The information offered here is to help gardeners grow vegetables successfully. It focuses on common questions asked as well as conditions, pests, and diseases that occur in St. Tammany Parish home gardens. Every attempt has been made to ensure the accuracy of the information, but references should always be checked, and LSU AgCenter personnel contacted if there are questions.

# South Louisiana Mirliton

*By Joe Lepine*



The mirliton was brought to South Louisiana from the Canary Islands. Mirlitons are also grown in other countries such as Japan, India, The Caribbean, South and Central America, the South West, and the Deep South of the United States. But no place like in south Louisiana. A mirliton plant could yield 15 to 20 tons of fruit per acre.

Mirlitons are planted in the spring after the last chance of frost or freeze. If a mirliton planted last year does not freeze the plant will start sprouting when the weather warms and daylight increases.

Trellising is ideal for growing the vines on. As the vines can run 50 feet or more in one season. Vines will happily climb trees, fences, or any structure within reach. The roots can extend for six feet in all directions and are shallow which make the vines subject to freezing.

A heavy layer of mulch will help protect mirliton roots from freezing.

New plants may need protection from animals until the plants are established. Squirrels will eat on mirliton tender shoots if not protected.

Mirliton fruit will mature in about 30 days after pollination. One vine could yield up to 150 fruit per season. Flowers must be pollinated by bees or by hand to produce fruit. Vines will not start setting fruit until climate conditions are right such as cooler weather. (September/October).



*Spring growth*



*Bee pollinating mirliton flowers*



*Vining over that does not move*

If you have an older vine it may set fruit in the early spring (March/April). Vines will continue producing fruit until we get a hard freeze. Frost may cause die back but not kill the vine, but a hard freeze will kill the vine. You should cut and mulch before a hard freeze is called for.



*Mirliton vining*

Sprouting a mirliton could only take a few weeks. Sprouts will come from the large end of the fruit. Once the sprout is at least 5" long, it can be placed in a pot and then transplanted to the ground once the weather warms and the last chance of frost is over



*Sprouting*



*Sprouting roots*

Prepare a large container with good potting soil, insert the fruit at a 45-degree angle, with the vine under the surface, and the upper third of the fruit exposed. Then set it aside but, protect the plant from freezing or over-watering. Over watering the pot will cause rotting of the fruit.

When the weather is warm with no chance of frost or freeze the mirliton should be planted in the ground. Place the mirliton in well drain soil mixing in a couple shovels of compose. Be sure the mirliton is watered when it does not rain. Mirlitons do not like sitting in standing water but also do not like drying out.



*Plant mirliton on a 45° angle*



*Be sure the vine is out of the soil*



Mirlitons are members of the cucurbit (squash) family.

I grew up hearing that a male mirlitons (the prickly skinned) and female mirlitons (smooth skinned) are needed to produce fruit. This however is a myth.



*Prickly Mirliton*

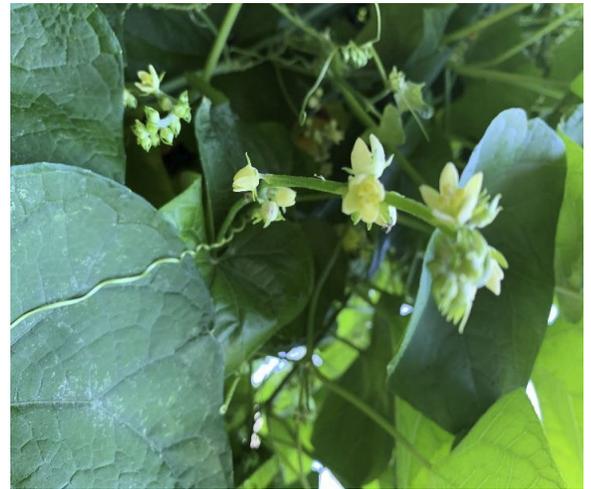
Mirlitons have both male and female flowers on the same vine. The reason most people plant several mirlitons is to guarantee growth. If one were to die you would have the other vine to produce mirliton.

The entire plant is edible, although people here in South Louisiana only eat the fruit. The tendrils can be used as greens in salads and stir fries, while the tubers "roots" are cooked like potatoes. I would never want to destroy my plant to eat the roots. I want my vines

to produce again next year.

Mirlitons prefer a soil P H of 6.0 to 6.8. The vines will require moderate fertilization. Too much nitrogen will result in lots of vine growth, with less fruit. A good ratio of fertilizer would be 8-24-24 or just a good compost will work fine. Use lots of mulch to prevent weeds and to aid in preventing moisture lost.

Some of the pest or insects that could be found on a mirliton vine are leaf-eating beetles and snails. But if the infestation is not bad there will not be serious damage to the vine and no chemical control measures will be needed. I will wash my vine with soapy water if I see signs of bugs. Remember you do not want to kill the pollinators.



*Male flowers*



*Female flower*



*Vine climbing on a garden hose*

Most mirliton sold by grocery stores are high-altitude varieties that will not withstand the heat and humidity of Louisiana's subtropical climate. The high-altitude mirlitons will start growing then wilt and die before bearing fruit as we start our hot humid weather in July and August.

We in Louisiana have different varieties with different shapes, sizes, and colors from green to white.

Ideal storage conditions are about 50 to 59 degrees F. If stored in the refrigerator it should be stored in a paper bag or wrapped in paper towels to maintain humidity.

Do not buy bruised fruit (brown spots) it should be firm with no damages.

The health benefits are: (1) low in calories (3 oz. is about 24 calories), (2) low in sodium, (3) a great source of potassium, (4) no saturated fats or cholesterol, and (5) rich in antioxidants, minerals, and vitamins.

Raw mirliton exudes a sticky sap when peeled and can cause skin irritation or a slight numbness in the hands and fingers. It is advised to peel the mirliton under cold running water or use protective gloves. The sap will dry on your hands and fingers making them look like they are peeling from a burn.



*Range of colors of Louisiana mirliton*



*One days' picking*



*Store mirlitons*



*Locally grown*

I like to boil the mirliton in a pot of water until tender like potatoes for salads. Cut them in half and remove the seed and then spoon out the pulp.



*Boiling in a large pot of water*



*Cut in half and remove the seed*



*Boiled for cutting*



*Scooped out mirliton shell*

This South Louisiana delicacy is wonderful when stuffed with pork, beef and/or shrimp.

**Ingredients:**

6 mirlitons, cut in halved	½ cup minced bell pepper
ground beef, pork or (70–90 count) shrimp, peeled and deveined	¼ cup mince garlic
butter or oil	1 tbsp chopped basil
1 cup minced onions	salt and black pepper to taste
½ cup minced celery	¼ cup chopped parsley
	2 cups breadcrumbs or rice
	12 pats butter

**Method:**

Boil mirliton in lightly salted water 45–60 minutes (depending upon the size of the mirlitons) or until meat is tender enough to scoop from shells. (Meat should be tender)

Using a spoon, remove seed and gently scoop all meat out of shell, being careful not to tear shell.

Drain excess liquid accumulated after scooping out the pulp. Reserve the pulp and shells for stuffing.

In a skillet, melt ¼ pound butter or oil over medium-high heat. Sauté pork and beef until golden brown. Stir until all liquids have evaporated, add onions, celery, bell peppers, minced garlic and basil then sauté 5–10 minutes or until vegetables are wilted (onions will be clear.)

Add the pulp and cook until all liquid has evaporated. This will help to tenderize the pulp. If shrimp will be used add now cooking for 2-5 minutes until pink and curled.

Cook about 30 minutes, stirring until flavors develop. After most of liquid has evaporated, remove from heat.

Season to taste using salt, pepper. Sprinkle in the parsley and breadcrumbs or rice to absorb any excess liquid, for holding the stuffing intact.

Stuff into the hollowed-out shells. Place stuffed mirlitons on baking pan and sprinkle with breadcrumbs and parsley. Top each mirliton with a pat of butter.

Bake 30–45 minutes or until golden brown.



*Cooked mirliton*



*Stuffed mirliton*



*Mirliton casserole*



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