

Gardening



Fig Leaf Gourd (*Cucurbita ficifolia*)

I love to grow cucurbits in the summer and strive for something a little different each season. Last summer I planted seeds of the fig leaf gourd, seven-year melon or chilacayote (*Cucurbita ficifolia*). After a slow start, this vine continues to produce more fruit than we can possibly eat.



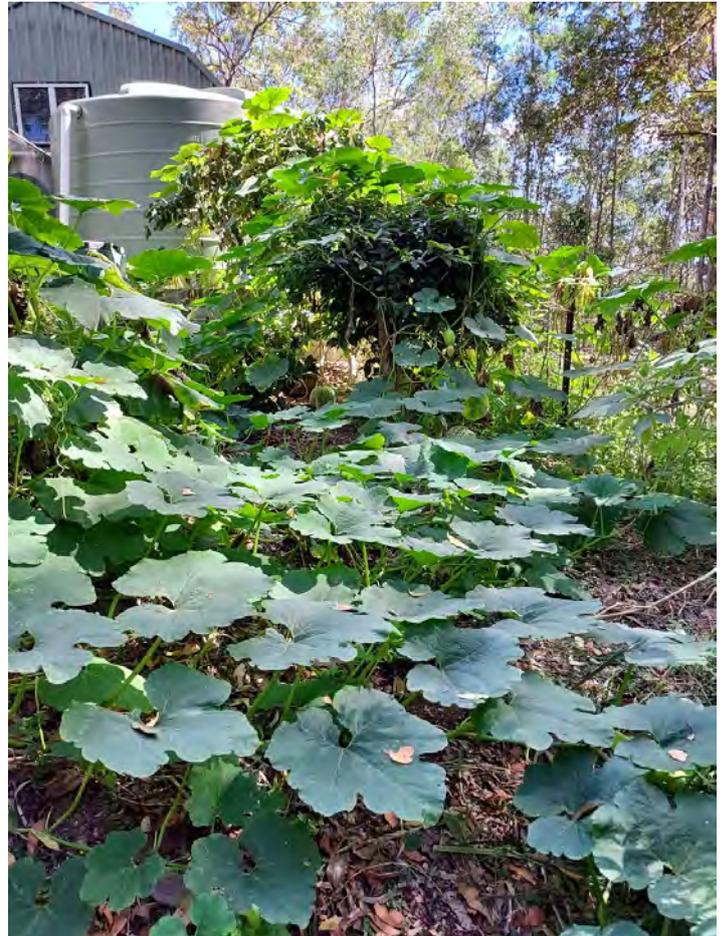
During a lockdown cleanout of my seed box, I discovered six seeds of this vigorous, central Mexican vine. Well past their use-by date, I planted all six seeds, only to discover that four plants germinated. They grew and grew, spreading way beyond their allocated space to engulf nearby shrubs and finally travel along a boundary fence for more than 20m (lesson – only plant one vine). The vine took ages to flower



and just when I was about the compost the lot, large clear yellow male and female blooms began to appear. The flowers are larger than those of a pumpkin and open more fully, allowing bees and all manner of other insects to facilitate pollination.

The fruit develop very quickly, reaching the size of an orange in less than a week. Daily harvest patrols are required to pick fruit while they are still small (this is our preferred size for harvest). Any that you miss quickly turn into watermelon-sized zeppelins. We eat the fruit raw grated into salad, cooked in stir-fry dishes, char-grilled, baked in slices (like zucchini), added to curries or made into soup. The closest comparison is probably a zucchini, as it has little flavour of its own. However, unlike zucchini, the fig leaf gourd holds its shape and texture when cooked. I have shared fruit with vegetarian friends who rave about its versatility and have all asked for seeds.

Another most remarkable thing about this vine is that it has continued to produce fruit all through winter and seems completely unaffected by cooler growing conditions. The



stems of the vine take root at intervals along its length, enabling it to sustain extensive growth despite relatively dry conditions. Best of all,

kangaroos, possums, rats, brush turkeys and other wildlife do not appear attracted to the vine. I began by bagging fruit for protection, but decided in the end that this was unnecessary.

While the fig leaf gourd is a vigorous vine (probably twice as vigorous as a pumpkin), it is easy enough to train along a fence line. It appears to cope with full sun or part shade and is not particularly demanding of water and nutrients. It is also quite pest and disease free. I suspect that my existing vine will continue to grow as a short-lived perennial vine into and beyond the coming summer season. Contact your local organic seed group or look online to enjoy this wonderfully productive vine.

