

HOME & GARDEN

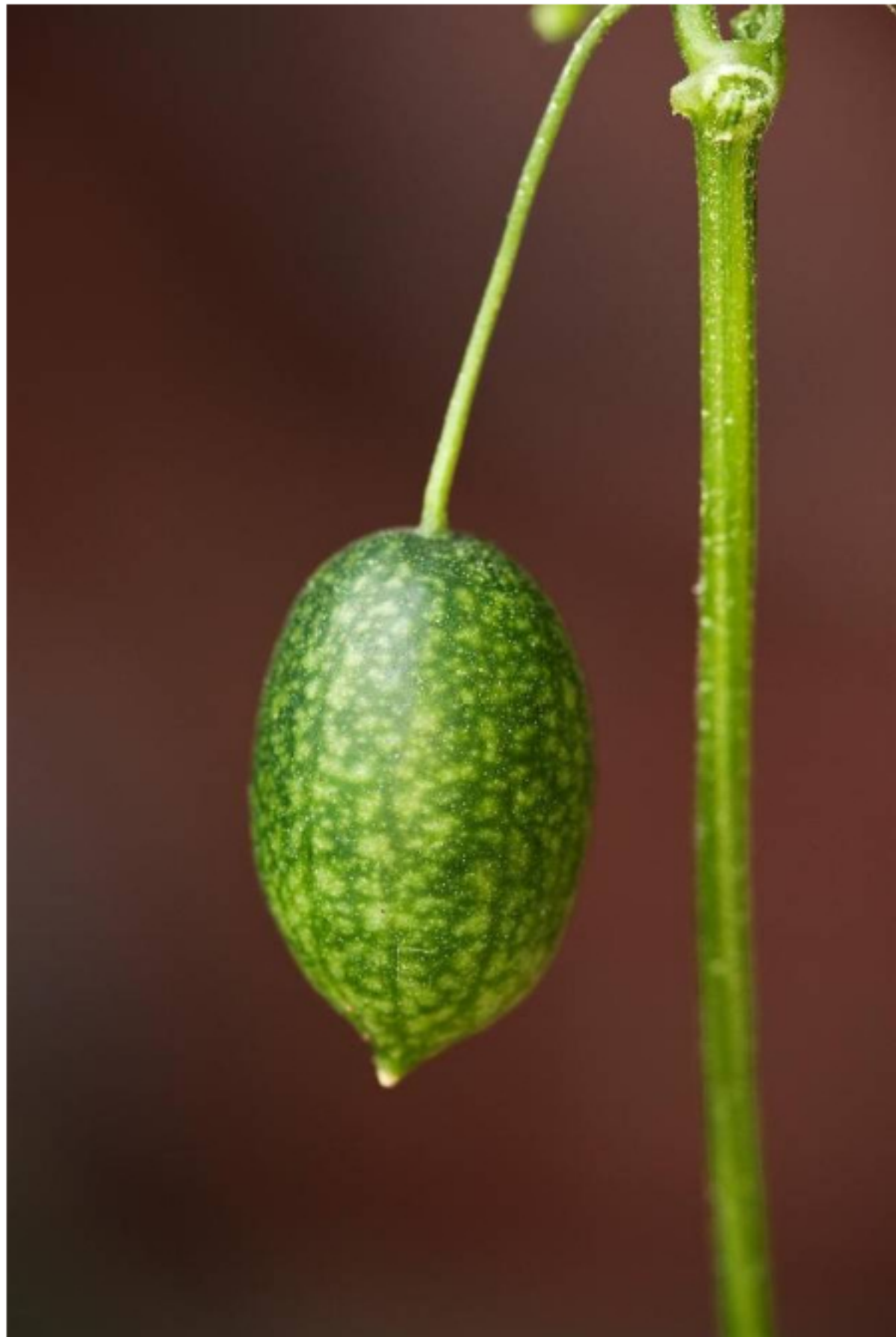
SEPTEMBER 25, 2015

Fairchild’s tropical garden column: Cucumbers fit for a dollhouse

HIGHLIGHTS

The creeping cucumber produces tiny fruit that humans probably shouldn’t eat

Some Native Americans consider it a snake bite remedy



Creeping cucumber’s tiny fruit **Kenneth Setzer** - Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden



BY KENNETH SETZER
Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden

A short-lived perennial vine called creeping cucumber can be found spreading over hedges and fences this time of year. It produces essentially wild, but very tiny, cucumbers.

Late summer into early fall brings loads of vining plants to my yard, the seeds of which were probably deposited by birds. By far the most aggressive is *Momordica charantia*, the balsam pear, with its odd warty orange fruit. Its foliage soon blankets everything in its path, especially bushes. I remove this before it starves its support of light.

Scarlet creeper (*Ipomoea hederifolia*) has been there all year but never on the same hedges as the balsam pear; scarlet creeper seems to prefer more open areas in which to germinate and climb.

Balsam pear, however, does share its territory with another creeping vine called *Melothria pendula*, or creeping cucumber. Its lobed leaves look like those of English ivy, though rarely larger than a nickel. They have a great leathery feel and sandpapery texture to them. The flowers, like many others in the Cucurbitaceae family, are crepe papery and bright yellow, only this species’ solitary flowers are very small, usually no larger than about one quarter of an inch across.

Now to the fruit: Creeping cucumber produces really tiny, really cute fruit that look very much like squat little cucumbers or tiny watermelons. But can we eat them? Maybe a better question is “*should* we?”

Sources seem conflicted. Julia Morton in *Wild Plants for Survival in South Florida* cites a source claiming the fruit is eaten “with no apparent harm,” while citing another source claiming they are “drastically purgative.”

Florida Ethnobotany by Daniel F. Austin is also conflicted, but to my mind leans toward considering it toxic enough.

This confusion may derive from the fact that all people react differently to what they consume. Plus, the fruit may be more or less irritating depending on how ripe it is and the quantity eaten.

Creeping cucumber, sometimes also called Guadeloupe cucumber, is also listed as a snake bite remedy in traditional Native American ethnobotany.

For some reason, creeping cucumber avoids my ficus hedge, preferring to clamber over cocoplum and other shrubs. It’s not terribly aggressive and unlikely to overwhelm whatever support it grows on, so I do not feel any need to remove it. I also feel no need to risk its potentially purgative effects. I leave mine for the birds to eat.

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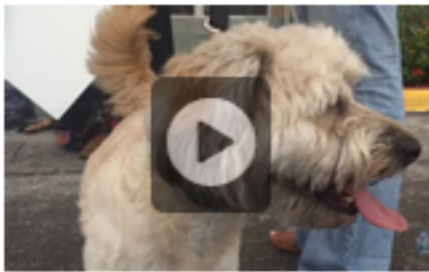
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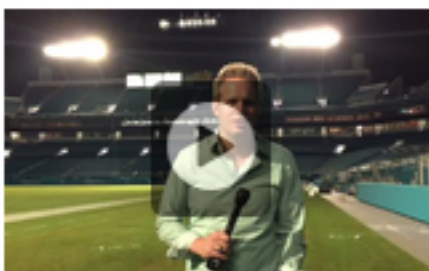
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