

Capers: An Interesting Plant that Does Well in the Foothills



Caper, is a native of the Mediterranean area, as well as of the tropics. The plant grows about two feet tall and spreading. The vines can be 7 to 10 feet long, and have a very deep root system. The plant is very drought resistant, needs little cultural care, requires good drainage, and is practically free of diseases and insect pests. The fruit is green, elongated, 2-3 inches long, 1/2 - 3/4 inch in diameter, and contains 200-300 seeds. The leaves are oval in shape, leathery and shiny green. The plant is propagated sexually (by seed) or asexually (by cuttings or roots). The preferred method is the latter simply because of the variability found in seed propagated plants.

The cuttings are rooted in the greenhouse for at least one year and then planted in the field, spaced about 16 by 16 feet apart. There is no detailed information on varieties. One group of caper is spineless, *C. spinosa*, whereas, another bears spines. Both appear to produce equally well. Mature caper plants are pruned to ground level during November-December. In the spring, tender new shoots develop, which are used as a vegetable and, according to some people, are better than asparagus spears. Buds are picked from mid-May to mid-August. A 2-year old plant will produce some, a 3-year old plant produces just over 2 lbs/year, and a plant older than 4 years may produce over 20 lbs. of buds per year. The unopened buds are picked by hand, sorted into five different qualities and brined in a similar way as cucumbers. The smaller the bud the higher the quality and price.

Capers are grown commercially in Morocco, Spain and Italy. The United States imports more than \$5 million worth of processed capers annually from these countries.

The principal use of capers is as a condiment - in salads or sauces, or with steaks, fish, poultry, or lamb. It is also used to make cosmetics that improve dry skin, and in making certain medicines.

Germinating and Transplanting Seedlings

1. Fill a jar (quart size) with warm water (110-115 F.).
2. Drop seed into water to soak for at least 12 hours. Let water cool to room temperature. No need to keep water temperature at 110-115 F. for the duration of this treatment.
3. Discard water, wrap seed in a moist towel, place in a plastic bag and keep in the refrigerator for 65 to 70 days.
4. Then take seed out of the refrigerator and treat it again as in step #2. No refrigeration necessary this time.
5. Plant about 1/4 to 1/2 inch deep in a soil mix of 50-25-25 parts planting mix, perlite and sand, respectively. Use 6 inch clay pots or deep flats.

Note: Caper seed is difficult to germinate. The above methods have resulted in 40-75% germination. Seedlings are very temperamental when transplanted. Some may wilt and die. To reduce this loss, transplant with soil attached to the root system, water and cover with a plastic bag immediately after transplanting. Use mature (dark brown-black) seed, one to two years old. Seeds can be obtained through Park Seed Company, Cokesbury Road, Greenwood, South Carolina, 29647-0001. (803)223-7333.

This article adapted from Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service, USDA. Please contact the Farm Advisor's office at cdcalaveras@ucdavis.edu or 754-6477 with your agricultural questions. Talk to a certified Master Gardener every Wednesday, 10:00-12:00, 754-2880.