

# No squashing his love of cucuzz



IRENE VIRAG

**M**y husband doesn't fish, hunt, play golf or hang out in bars. He hangs out in our vegetable garden. Like a lot of male gardeners, he has a thing for growing tomatoes — especially heirloom varieties like Brandywine, Box Car Willie and Striped German. He drools over Swiss chard and eggplants and nurtures lettuce and broccoli. He even gets a kick out of radishes.

And he's practically dewy-eyed when it comes to squash. Butternut, acorn, cocozelle, pattypan, whatever. Once my husband grew a 10-pound zucchini and insisted I take his picture with it. I was surprised he didn't try to hang it over the fireplace.

But it wasn't until two years ago, while buying tomatoes at the Peconic River Herb Farm in Calverton — where owner Cris Spindler features a number of engaging vegetables — that he discovered the squash of squashes. An Italian native that my garden books call Rampicante Zucchetta or Tromboncino. Like Box Car Willie tomatoes, it's an heirloom vegetable, which means it's a cultivar of a plant that's been grown for at least 50 years.

Cris called it by its common name — cucuzz, or phonetically, cagootz, with the accent on the last syllable.

The seedlings seemed mild-mannered in their cell packs, but by any name or pronunciation, cucuzz is an in-your-face vegetable. It is big — really big. If my husband didn't trim it back, the vine would have taken over our fence, our arbors and maybe even our house. The lime-green fruit followed suit — reaching 3 or 4 feet in length. Most of the squashes were curved, shaped like thick scimitars or musical instruments, while a few grew straight and resembled nothing so much as baseball bats.

He took one of them to the office and wallowed in ego gratification. "Cucuzz," he said as if he had been born to the Italian idiom. "I grew it myself."

Along with praise and strange looks, he also got a recipe. "It makes a great stew," a photo editor told him. "Or you can fry up the blossoms." We tried the stew and it was terrific — actually the flavor is best preserved if you harvest the fruit at about 18 inches. Although, we did put one of the extra-large base-



It's an impressive squash, this Rampicante Zucchetta, or Tromboncino, also known as cucuzz (pronounced "cagootz"). For some devoted gardeners, it can become nearly an obsession.

ball-bat beauties to another use. We kept it in the potting room as a decoration for at least a year before it started to

go bad. It complemented the wallpaper and it was a wonderful conversation piece. "What's that?" visitors asked

the minute they saw it.

My husband had his answer down pat. "Cucuzz," he said. "I grew it myself."

So you can imagine his terror this season when he waited too long to check with Cris. She was out of cucuzz. She didn't even have one left for herself.

I have to admit that I shared some of his consternation. You become accustomed to the faces of your garden. Like lacecap hydrangeas and blue salvia and tomatoes and eggplants, the squash of squashes was integral to our summers.

We checked our nursery roster and, not only couldn't we find cucuzz, we couldn't always find people who knew what it was. And then in the fading days of June, working on a lead from a friend of a friend, we found Giro DiLillo, who is only 36 but is wise beyond his years and operates Prianti Farms in Dix Hills with his uncle, Robert Prianti.

"Someone told me you have this particular squash," my husband said on the phone. "I think it's called cucuzz. It gets very big and. . ."

"Yeah," Giro said. "We got it."

"Wow! I can't believe it. I've been looking all over. I. . . ." Giro politely ended the conversation and got off the phone. He probably thought he was talking to some kind of crazy man, which — well, I'm not going to go there.

As it turned out, Prianti Farms, which Giro's grandfather started in 1924 when he emigrated from Brooklyn, sells all kinds of flowers and shrubs and is a regular Italian smorgasbord when it comes to vegetables. According to Giro, about 80 to 90 percent of the vegetables are grown in the greenhouses at the nursery, which covers more than 3½ acres. Prianti's features an extensive array of tomatoes, a glossary of peppers with descriptive names like Banana Supreme and Inferno, plenty of eggplant varieties and herbs and, heart of my husband's heart, cucuzz.

"Sometimes people buy it by accident," Giro grinned. "Of course, Italians like it. We barbecue it — slice it up, put some olive oil and rosemary on it and put it right on the barbecue. You have to catch them before they get huge. My grandfather used to fry the blossoms. He'd say to my grandmother, 'Mamma, can you fry these up for me?'"

According to Giro, who had started the day picking gooseberries at his home in Dix Hills with his children, 8-year-old Giro Jr. and 3-year-old Gianna, cucuzz is becoming more and more popular each year.

I can understand why. But I still don't know what it is about men and vegetable gardens. Sometimes, I think they all suffer from zucchini envy.