



MANGO GINGER

— an unusual edible?

The 2011 mango ginger members' experiment showed that this plant is unlikely to become a popular crop in the UK. Francis Rayns reports on members' feedback.

Inspired by our Sowing New Seeds project, in 2011 we asked members to try growing mango ginger as part of our members' experiments scheme. In only three cases did the plant grow large enough to be harvested, and then the comments on its "eatability" were less than favourable. But mango ginger did find some favour as a houseplant.

The mango ginger or amada plant *Curcuma amada*, in the Ziniberaceae family, is native to tropical Asia. It looks rather like an aspidistra and grows from pale brown rhizomes (right) that are smaller and rounder than those of true ginger. The scent of the cut flesh is said to be rather like an unripe mango. Both the rhizomes and leaves are eaten,

and give a subdued spicy taste to curries and stews.

Our mango ginger members' experiment proved popular. We sent rhizomes to nearly 400 experimenters, about a quarter of them representing



schools. Disappointingly, only 112 returned their record sheets. The results were also disheartening – with over half of experimenters reporting that the rhizomes never sprouted. We had suggested sprouting the rhizomes in a warm, dimly lit place that was not too dry. People tried a variety of locations, such as greenhouse benches, sheds, kitchen shelves, bedrooms and airing cupboards, and some moved them about in increasingly desperate attempts to achieve a result or just planted them unsprouted. The rhizomes seemed equally reluctant to sprout in all locations tried.

Growth started between early April and September, on average 3.6 months after receipt. Sometimes, the sprouts never grew beyond a small white bump; only half the rhizomes that showed signs of life went on to produce viable plants. These plants grew up to 70cm high by the end of the summer, usually with about three leaves. At Ryton, we had a fine example growing on a windowsill but, even in a heated room, the foliage succumbed to the frost in February 2012.

With such poor plant performance, only three experimenters produced a crop that they were prepared to eat. They were not enthusiastic and reported that the leaves were "rather tough, even after stir frying" and the rhizomes were "bitter and dull" and "scarcely able to flavour pasta". The plants did receive some favourable comments for use as an ornamental houseplant, and several people intended to overwinter them to see if they will be more productive in 2012.

The rhizomes that we sent out were bought from an Asian grocery shop in Leicester; previous rhizomes bought from this source did grow successfully. The batch we sent out had recently been imported by air from India. It is quite possible that they had been chilled on the journey, which can delay sprouting. There are inevitably going to be many different varieties of mango ginger that, rather like potatoes, will have different natural dormancies and responses to environmental conditions.