

TOMATILLO

Gardening tips provided by
Jefferson Farm & Gardens



Overview

Tomatillo, *Physalis ixocarpa*, is a warm season vegetable of the Solanaceae family and is related to peppers, tomatoes, and potatoes. In Latin America, tomatillos are an important ingredient in salsa verde. The tomatillo's taste can be described as an herby lemon flavor, which mellows when cooked. The tomatillo is a good source of vitamins C and A as well as potassium.

Choosing Varieties

There are a few varieties of tomatillos available that differ in days till maturity, fruit color, and fruit size, as well as other traits. A few available varieties include:

- Dr. Wyche's Yellow (sweet yellow fruit)
- Purple (purple skin, stores well)
- Toma Verde (early, green fruit)

It is recommended to try a few varieties to determine overall plant performance and personal preference.

Planting Tips

Tomatillo is a warm season vegetable and cannot tolerate cold weather.

For best results, seedlings should be transplanted into the garden instead of direct seeding. In Missouri, seedlings can be planted mid-to-late May when the danger of a freeze has passed, and the soil has warmed sufficiently.

Seeds can be started indoors under lights about 8 weeks before the transplanting date. Seeds should be planted about ¼-½ inch deep in containers or cell packs with well-drained potting soil. The potting medium should not be allowed to dry completely. Seedlings should be hardened off before transplanting by setting plants outside in the shade a week before planting.

Tomatillo seedlings should be planted so that only the top few leaves are above the soil line. Leaves that will be buried should be cut off. The buried stem will produce roots giving the plant more support. Tomatillo seedlings should be planted at a spacing of about 2 feet within the row and about 3 feet between rows. The plant has a natural sprawling habit, which should be taken into account for spacing.

Sowing instructions for a particular variety can usually be found on the seed packet. At least two tomatillos must be planted to ensure adequate pollination.

Soil Fertility and Pest Control

Tomatillo seedlings should be planted in well-drained soils and would benefit from the addition of nutrients either in the form of a complete fertilizer or aged compost. Once plant seedlings become established, they are fairly drought and heat tolerant. Spread mulch around the plants to conserve moisture and reduce weeds.

Generally insects are not a problem with tomatillos. Blights and other foliar diseases can be avoided by promoting good air circulation between plants by properly spacing them, not wetting the foliage, and staking the plants. Care should be taken if the plants are staked because the stems are more brittle than tomato stems and have a tendency to snap. Members of the Solanaceae family should be rotated with other crops to avoid buildup of soil borne diseases.

Harvesting

Tomatillos can be harvested when they have filled out their husk or when the husk has split open. If the green varieties of tomatillos turn a yellow color, the fruits are fully matured, but they lose some of their signature flavor. Before using the fruit, it should be husked and washed to remove the sticky residue. Tomatillos will keep up to a week if left out on the counter or longer if husked and stored in the refrigerator.

Seed Sources

Tomatillo seed can be ordered from mail order companies via phone or website. Seed Savers Exchange (1-563-382-5990, seedsavers.org) and Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds (1-417-924-8917, rareseeds.com) are two companies that sell tomatillo varieties.

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