

Community Horticulture Fact Sheet # 34 Growing Salsa in the Northwest

Salsa has replaced catsup as the American condiment of choice. Peppers and tomatoes, the main ingredients, can be tough to grow here, since they prefer a warmer climate. Use techniques that make the plants believe they are growing in Yakima or somewhere with hot summers.

- * Choose early-maturing varieties. Start the seed indoors under artificial lights in early March. See fact sheet #7 "Growing Transplants".
- * In early May, harden them off for 7-10 days. Take them outside to a protected spot for the day and bring them in at night.
- * Choose a place to plant your starts in full sun. Raised beds or containers will usually be warmer. A spot in front of a south or west wall that reflects heat is perfect. Plantings near or on a concrete or asphalt sidewalk, driveway, or patio will benefit from reflected heat.
- * Plant in well-prepared soil with lots of added compost. Cover the soil with black plastic or landscape fabric for several weeks before planting to warm the soil.
- * Then cover your crop with a cold frame or plastic tunnel to heat the air around the plant. (See fact sheet #41 for information on using plastic to protect plants.)

Peppers

We live in the wrong place for really hot chili peppers. The same variety, that will be red hot when grown in Phoenix, Dallas or Miami, will be somewhat mild in our cool

climate. To turn up the heat in your peppers, modify your pepper plants mini-climate, avoid overusing nitrogen fertilizer, and give maturing plants a bit of moisture stress.

Spiciness is governed principally by variety. Unfortunately for hot chili lovers, some of the hottest like 'Habanero' require more heat units than we get in the best of summers. The descriptions below should help you choose a pepper variety. I listed them in approximate order of hotness. Keep in mind that peppers cross-pollinate freely, so a particular pepper (non-hybrid) from one seed source will often be a bit different from the same variety from another seed company. Starred * varieties take a longer season and may not mature fruit reliably.

Anaheim - very long (6-7"), 1 1/2 wide smooth fruit; deep green color turns to red.

Ancho* - heart-shaped, 4", wrinkled fruit; green to rust red; can be dried for pepper ropes or grinding into a mild chili powder.

Large Cherry - small, round fruits start dark green and ripen to brilliant red; productive.

Hungarian Wax - reliable producer of medium hot, 4-6" long, conical canary yellow fruit; orange when fully mature.

Mexi Bell F1 - bell-shaped but chili-flavored fruit starts green, progresses to brownish and then turns red.

Early Jalapeno - deep green, 3" fruits taper to a blunt tip; very hot and red at maturity.

Serrano* - 2" fruit borne prolifically on tall plants; mature fruit red and very hot.

Super Chili F1 - very ornamental, since fruit are held upright; produces abundant 2" cone-shaped, very hot, fruit; color goes from green to orange, to red; dries well.

Cayenne (several kinds; the most reliable is 'Super Cayenne Hybrid') open-pollinated kind's fruits are usually 5" and curled; hybrid is earlier with 3" fruit. Both pungent, even when small and green, but usually used when red. Dries well; often used ground.

Tabasco* - light yellow-green peppers become red on maturity; 7½", fiery flavor, used to make pepper sauce.

Warmth is the most important consideration for growing peppers. Anything you do to increase heat will give you a better harvest. At 50-60°F. plants will not grow or set fruit. At the other extreme, temperatures over 90°F. hurt the pollen causing blossom drop and no fruit. Temperatures under plastic can easily shoot above 90°F., so remove your plastic or at least vent it well when the plants start to bloom.

Harvesting will depend upon the kind of pepper and its use. Peppers are generally picked as soon as they reach the full size for that variety. The spiciness increases as they size-up, but letting them mature past that probably won't increase the heat. Left on the vines, some peppers will turn red, orange, brown or purplish as they age. More mature fruits are sweeter and contain more vitamins A & C.

Tomatoes are grown by most gardeners, so I won't go into detail here. Pick a dependable variety like 'Early Girl', 'Oregon Spring', 'Early Cascade' or 'Juliet' and follow the tips above. Tomatoes in our area are subject to a disease called late blight that often ruins the crop. The best way to protect your plants is to keep the foliage as dry as

possible. See fact sheet # 37 "Tomato Problems."

Tomatillos are used with or can completely replace tomatoes in salsa recipes. They are a relative of the tomato and require much the same growing conditions. The vines grow to three feet and sprawl even wider. The fruits look like small (1½ - 2") tomatoes that are encased in a papery husk; the plant is sometimes called "husk tomato."

Tomatillo fruit is usually harvested when it has sized up (it tightly fills and may split the husk), but is still green and tart. As tomatillos ripen they get yellow or purplish and quite sweet.

Cilantro is a pretty annual herb with delicate, finely divided foliage and white flower clusters used abundantly in both Mexican and Asian cuisine. The young leaves have a distinctive taste that some folks love and others hate. Figure out which camp you are in before you make 30 jars of cilantro-herbed salsa.

Cilantro is easy to grow from seed in any reasonably good soil. It grows fast, but, if you need it for Cinco de Mayo, try planting in fall. Over-wintered young plants will be ready to harvest much earlier.

Onions are easiest grown from transplants started in February and then planted out when the stems are about 1/8th inch in diameter. (Harden them off first.) While sets look like they would be easier, they often bolt before bulbing up properly. If you decide to go with sets, pick the smallest bulbs.

Onions are shallow-rooted. Grow them in a good soil well amended with compost. Keep them well watered and use a light mulch.

Garlic is not difficult, if you plant it in the late fall or early spring. See fact sheet #29.