

Cilantro, *Coriandrum sativum*, Apiaceae

Of all the herbs in your garden, cilantro can be one of the most difficult to grow. Many people think that it's their fault that cilantro doesn't last very long, but what they don't know is that cilantro is a very short-lived plant.

Cilantro is a member of the carrot family, and is a highly fragrant annual. It has a taste of parsley with citrus-like overtones. When grown for its leaves, we call it cilantro. When grown as a spice for its dried seeds, it is called coriander. While most people have no objection to coriander, the same can't be said of cilantro. Its leaves have a very pungent odor that some people find objectionable.



Cilantro is one of the oldest herbs to be used by mankind, perhaps going back as far as 3000 BC. It is mentioned in early Sanskrit writings dating back to 1500 BC. The seeds have been found in the tombs of the Egyptian pharaohs and in Grecian ruins from the Bronze Age. It was brought to the British colonies in North America in 1670 and was one of the first spices cultivated by the settlers.

Many gardeners grow cilantro for its savory leaves; however, the entire plant is edible, from root to leaf. Unlike most herbs, cilantro requires cooler temperatures to thrive. It should be planted in the early spring or in the fall when temperatures are cooler. Once the root of the cilantro plant gets above 75 degrees, it will bolt, sending up a flower stalk and turning the leaves bitter.

When planting cilantro, keep in mind that this herb has a very sensitive taproot, that if disturbed will cause damage to the plant. Plant your seeds in the place you want them to grow to avoid having to transplant them later, or start in peat or paper pots which can be set directly into the soil. When buying starter plants at the nursery choose smaller plants with plenty of room in the pot and no roots showing through the bottom. Use extreme care when removing them so as not to disturb the taproot. Choose a sunny area with some afternoon shade and sow seeds one-half inch deep after all danger of frost has passed. As plants start to grow, thin them to 4 inches apart, and apply mulch to keep the roots cooler. Plant new crops every three weeks to ensure a constant supply. This plant rarely has any problems with insects or disease. Good companion plants are caraway, anise and dill. However, do not plant near fennel, or the fennel will suffer.

Pinch off leaves as needed early in the morning for the best flavors. Fresh cilantro does not keep very well. It's best to place the cut stems in a glass of water, just like flowers, cover with a plastic bag and store in the refrigerator.

After eight to ten weeks the cilantro in your garden will flower. You can keep growing it for the seeds, or simply remove it and plant something else. If you choose to save it for the seeds, let it grow until the seeds and flowers have turned brown. Then cut the whole plant and store in upside down in a paper bag. Make sure the seeds have completely dried before using as coriander, or the seeds will be bitter.

Cilantro is the perfect herb for any salsa recipe. It is widely used in Asian and Mexican cuisine, and many other dishes. Cut a few leaves and toss them into your green salads to give them a fresh tangy taste, or add them to potato and fruit salads. If you've never been much of a cilantro fan, start with small amounts because cilantro does have a strong, unique flavor. Before long you too may become a cilantro lover.

References

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The Complete Vegetable and Herb Gardener., Simon & Schuster Macmillan, 1997.

[The Tasteful Garden](#), retrieved 1/20/2008.

[Planet Natural](#), retrieved 1/22/2008.