

Tomatillos

The tomatillo (toe-mah-TEE-yo) has several common names, including Mexican green tomato, husk tomato, jamberry, miltomate, and tomate verde. They are often mistakenly called tomatoes, but tomatillos belong to the *Physalis* species along with ground cherries and cape gooseberries. Depending on the variety, they range from an inch in diameter to plum-sized, and come in green, yellow, or purple colors.

It wasn't until around 1980 that tomatillos were commonly grown in the U.S. Even then, it was mostly relegated to Mexican and New Mexican cuisine, most notably salsa. Today, one can usually find them at farmer's markets with a limited selection in some supermarkets. Once you know how easy they are to grow and store, how many uses they have, and how nutritious they are, you will be sure to include at least one tomatillo plant in your garden.

Sow seeds indoors about 6 weeks before it is time for outdoor planting. Mid-April is a good time to start the seeds in the Pacific Northwest. Growing conditions are the same as for tomatoes, so follow the same seed starting, planting, and cultivation techniques. Tomatillo plants tend to get large and gangly so a sturdy cage is a necessity. Provide regular water throughout the entire growing season.

Tomatillo fruits are enclosed in a papery husk. The husk forms first with just a small fruit inside. As the fruit grows, it fills the entire husk. When the husk splits, the fruit is ready to pick. The fruits fall to the ground quite easily, but can be harvested from there as long as they are still firm and show no signs of mold.

Tomatillos can be stored for several weeks in their husks in a cool dry place. For longer storage, simply husk, wash, and freeze. Tomatillos are acidic like most tomatoes so they can be canned in the same way. For use in soups, first dip in boiling water to remove the wax, then puree, seal in canning jars, and process in a boiling-water bath as you would tomato sauce.

Tomatillos are low in calories and high in vitamin C. One medium-sized fruit contains less than 11 calories and 4 mg of vitamin C. Combine with jalapenos, onion, garlic, cilantro, and seasonings to make your own salsa cruda. Puree with cooked squash and onions to make a delicious creamy soup. Add them chopped or pureed to stews or soups for a bit of tartness. Spruce up your summer salads with variety by adding chopped raw tomatillos.

Most seed catalogs that sell tomato seeds also offer tomatillo seeds. Varieties that are commonly available are 'Cisneros' (large green fruit), 'Toma Verde' (early-maturing large greenish-yellow fruit), 'Purple' (small deep purple fruit – makes interesting salsa), and 'De Milpa' (small green fruit blushed with purple).

Once you try tomatillos in your garden and kitchen, you will be hooked.

References

Schneider, Elizabeth. *Uncommon Fruits & Vegetables*, A Commonsense Guide. New York: William Morrow and Co. 1998.

Yepsen, Roger. *A Celebration of Heirloom Vegetables*. New York: Artisan. 1998.

[Tomatillo](#). Retrieved January 8, 2005.