Growing a Salsa Garden

*There aren’t many things in life that can beat the taste of gloriously-chilled homemade salsa on a hot summer day. Unfortunately, purchasing all of the produce that you need for a phenomenal fresh salsa can be costly. Save money, and develop a closer relationship with your food, by growing everything you need in your own backyard.*

The vegetables and herbs that you need for fresh homemade salsa all have similar cultivation requirements, which makes deciding where to plant your garden surprisingly simple. Look for a full sun location where your plants will be exposed to direct sunlight for more than six hours per day. Making sure that the plants in your salsa garden receive the appropriate amount of sunlight is essential, as the size, appearance and taste of the vegetables and herbs can suffer when grown in inadequate sunlight. Also, while your plants can tolerant a variety of soil conditions, they will perform best and be at their most flavorful when grown in rich, fertile soil with healthy drainage. Consult the information tags that came with your nursery plants to determine how much garden space to allot for each plant; avoid positioning plants too close together as this can limit air circulation and invite problems with fungal diseases.

Whether you’re making salsa verde, pico de gallo or recreating the salsa from your favorite Mexican restaurant, these flavorful vegetables and herbs deserve a place in any salsa lover’s garden.

**Tomato**

Despite the small detail of being a fruit, the tomato is the most popular home garden vegetable grown in the United States, according to the University of Illinois Extension. It’s easy to understand why, as the aroma and taste of freshly-harvested garden tomatoes far surpasses that of their commercially-grown counterparts. Tomato plants are simple to grow at home and thrive with regular irrigation and fertilization. Side-dress your plants with an application of 10-10-10 fertilizer once the tomatoes have grown to the size of golf balls; repeat the application every three weeks until the end of the growing season to ensure the production of healthy, flavorful tomatoes.

**Onion**

Savory and full-bodied, onion is another vegetable that has become a home garden favorite. Whether you’re growing yellow, red, white or spring onions to use in your fresh salsa, your onion plants will grow most successfully when provided with 1 inch of irrigation per week. Side-dress plants with a 10-10-10 fertilizer four to six weeks after planting; apply a second application one month after the first. Wait to harvest your onions until the tops have fallen over and dried.

**Cilantro**

Cilantro, often referred to as Chinese Parsley or Coriander, is a green, leafy herb, that is actually the leaves and stems of the Coriander plant. It is also, oddly enough, a member of the carrot family. Though dried cilantro is available in most supermarkets, the dried herb lacks the intense cilantro taste and aroma that you come to expect from fresh salsa. Sow cilantro seeds every three weeks from September through February to maintain a continual supply of this deliciously pungent herb. Water the cilantro regularly to keep its soil moist to the touch.

**Tomatillos**

Tomatillos are small fruits that look like unripe tomatoes wrapped in a papery husk. The mildly sweet, yet subtly tart, flavor of the tomatillo is what makes Salsa Verde something to write home about. The name and appearance may lead you to believe that the tomatillo is a variety of tomato, but don’t be fooled. Though they come from the same family of plants, the tomatillo is of a different genus. Tomatillos grow heartily in most of the United States when provided with 1 to 1 ½ inches of irrigation per week. When harvesting tomatillos, the husk is a helpful indicator of the overall health of the fruit. Look for unblemished, firm tomatillos that mostly fill their husks.

**Jalapeño Peppers**

Probably the most well-known of all the varieties of hot peppers, the Jalapeño has become something of a Southwestern American tradition what with Jalapeño Poppers, Jalapeño jelly and the like. When cooking with Jalapeños, the spiciness of the pepper depends largely on how it is prepared. If you want to ensure that your salsa or Jalapeño dish is knock-your-socks-off spicy, harvest peppers with zipper-like scars all over their skins.

**Serrano Chilies**

# The Serrano chili is a glorious little pepper that packs five times the punch of a Jalapeño. These slender little chilies start off green in color, but can change to brown, yellow, red, or orange when ripe. Harvest glossy-skinned Serranos from your pepper plant according to your personal taste preferences; the deepening skin color indicates an intensification of the pepper’s heat.

# Anaheim Chilies

Anaheim chilies are a rather large variety of chili, usually measuring between six and eight inches long, with a sweet and mildly spicy taste that provides a calm contrast when combined with hotter chilies such as Jalapeño or Serrano. Named for the city in California, Anaheim chilies are also sometimes known as Chiles Verdes (Green Chilies), Rio Grande peppers, or New Mexico peppers. When harvesting Anaheim chilies, chose peppers that are firm, without blemishes or soft spots, and have tight, glossy skins.

# Yellow Caribe

These yellow beauties go by several names, but are more commonly known as Banana Peppers, or Wax Chilies. With their slightly sweet taste they are most commonly eaten pickled. About the size of a Jalapeño, some gardeners insist the Yellow Caribe can grow up to eight inches if watered regularly. Harvest Yellow Caribe peppers that are bright yellow in color and have smooth skins.

Jalapeño, Serrano, Anaheim and Yellow Caribe peppers perform best when supplied with regular irrigation. Fertilize the peppers in your salsa garden with a side-dressing of 10-10-10 fertilizer after the first flush of peppers have formed to encourage an additional flush of peppers to set.