

Tomatillos & Ground Cherries

Physalis spp.



Tomatillos and ground cherries are tomato relatives that hide their fruits in papery husks. They are easy to grow, and quite productive. **Tomatillos produce best with two plants for pollination.** They are the essential ingredient for salsa verde. Ground cherries are a smaller sweet version of tomatillos that can be eaten fresh or used in fruit salads and cobblers.

SITE REQUIREMENTS

Tomatillos and ground cherries require at least 7 hours of direct sun and rich, well-drained soil, and a neutral pH. Prepare the planting area by mixing 2-3" of composted manure into the top 4-6" of the soil. Mix in an all-purpose granular fertilizer and lime in the bottom of each planting hole.

PLANTING

You can start seeds indoors mid February through March, 6-8 weeks before the last frost date. Sow seeds ¼" deep and cover with a fine layer of soil. Bottom heat will help them sprout faster. Transplant seedlings into 4" pots when they have two sets of true leaves. Harden off your seedlings two weeks before desired transplanting date.

Tomatillos thrive in warm, dry weather and are best planted outdoors May through June when soil is 65°F. It helps to warm the soil first by covering the planting area with 1-2" of compost, plastic mulch or a cold frame. It is best to protect new plants with a cold frame, cloche or other product until temperatures are consistently warmer (mid May-June). Set out plants 2-3' apart in rows 2-3' apart. Water in new plants with liquid seaweed or B1.

Keep new beds well weeded and slightly moist. You can cover new plantings with floating row cover for 3-4 weeks to prevent flea beetles and other insects. Plastic or organic mulches can help heat the soil, retain moisture and prevent blight. Tomatillo plants can reach 3-4' tall. It may help to stake, cage or prune your plants to help support heavy fruit. Ground cherries reach about 18" tall and 2-3' wide, and generally do not need additional support.

WATER REQUIREMENTS

How much water your plants will require depends on the soil and weather. Tomatillos and ground cherries are drought tolerant, but yield best with a steady supply of moisture. A weekly slow, deep (2-3 gallons) watering is ideal. A consistent water supply can help prevent blossom end rot. Drip irrigation is the best way to provide even moisture, while having fewer disease issues.

FERTILIZING

Tomatillos and ground cherries are medium to heavy feeders and benefit from having a mild liquid fertilizer every two weeks once the fruits begin to appear. Another option is to side dress plants once flowers appear with composted manure.

HARVESTING & STORAGE

Fruits are ripe when the husks are full and turn brown. Fully ripe fruit falls to the ground, and can still be harvested before they start to rot.

Tomatillos can store 2-4 weeks at 45°F. They can also be frozen (once par boiled and pureed) or dried. Ground cherries are especially tasty dried and can store up to three months in an air tight container. Fresh fruit can also store at room temperature for a few months. Of course large batches of salsa verde or other favorite recipes, can be canned.

PESTS & DISEASES

Good gardening practices such as crop rotation, drip irrigation, proper planting time, floating row covers and removal of entire plants when harvest is done all help prevent many pests and diseases.

*Aphids are perhaps the most prevalent pest on tomatillos. Their damage often appears as curled, deformed, and yellow leaves. You may find colonies of green aphids on the under sides of the leaves and growing tins.

Also, a sticky sap on leaves and stems and white aphid skeletons can be visible. There are numerous control methods to combat aphids such as insecticidal soap.

*Cutworm can often mow down all new transplants in one night. Spinosad or Sluggo Plus are organic controls for cut worms.

*Snails and slugs leave large holes in leaves or eat new transplants when they feed at night. They often leave iridescent trails on leaves and the ground. Slug baits and beer traps are just two ways to control them.

*Flea beetles chew dozens of tiny holes in the leaves. For prevention cover new seed beds with floating row cover until plants are 8" tall. Dust with diatomaceous earth or spray with pyrethrin.

*Spider mite damage appears as many, white pin sized dots all over leaves, or yellowing leaves. Tiny red mites will be on the under sides of leaves and webbing may be present along the main veins. Spider mites are most prevalent in hot dry weather. Spray with insecticidal soap three times at 7 day intervals. Predatory mites, Mite X and pyrethrins are also effective.

*Early blight begins as dark brown spots ringed in yellow. The fungus overwinters in the soil and infection can be greatly reduced by using plastic mulch and avoiding over head irrigation. Pick off infected areas and spray with copper or Serenade to help reduce the spread of the fungus.

*Tobacco mosaic virus appears as yellow, mottled, deformed leaves. There is no cure. Remove and destroy infected plants.

*Late blight is common in the cool wet conditions of spring. It appears as dark spots on leaves and stems which grow quickly. Plastic mulch and avoiding over head irrigation will greatly reduce the spread of this fungus which over winters in the soil. Copper and Serenade can help slow the spread of the fungus.

*Verticillium wilt first appears as yellowing leaves on one side of a stem. Cross sections of the stems near the base of the plant will show interior discoloring. There is no cure, remove and destroy infected plants. Replant in a new area.

*Blossom end rot appears as brown spots on the end of the fruit. It is caused by a lack of calcium availability or water stress. Adding lime to the soil before you plant and providing consistent moisture can prevent the problem. Calcium sprays can also help.

VARIETIES

Ground Cherries/ Cape Gooseberries *Physalis peruviana*

Aunt Molly's- 70-80 days. An heirloom variety from Poland that is especially sweet and fruity. Prolific 1" golden fruits can be dried, baked or made into preserves.

Tomatillo *Physalis ixocarpa*

Mexican Strain- 65 days. Larger 2" fruits are especially savory. Heavy yields. Self-fruitful.

Pineapple - 70 days. Plant produces good yields. It has a fruity taste that is similar to that of pineapple. The small, cherry size fruit turn from green to yellow-gold when mature. They are surrounded by a papery husk that turns from green to brown as they ripen and splits open when they are ready to harvest.

Purple - 70 days. Plant has subtle purple veins in the leaves and the husks are light green to buff colored. Sweet tart flavor. Some fruits ripen to a purple color. Great for salsa.

Toma Verde – 60 days. Loads of tangy apple-green fruits appear on bushy spreading plants. The tomatillos are enclosed in a papery husk, which turns tan and splits open when they are ripe. 60-70 days from transplant. Care: Plant 20-30" apart in rows 3-4' apart in full sun. Sprawling plants need lots of space.