

RODALE'S Organic Life

Your Guide to Growing Tomatillos



Surprise: The essential ingredient in the green salsas of Mexican cuisine is not the tomato but the tomatillo, a fruit with a citrusy sweet flavor.

Dainty paper husks encase the tomatillo, and by late summer, what seems like billions of fruits dangle from the tomatillo plant's branches.

Background

Native to Mexico and domesticated by the Aztecs around 800 B.C., the tomatillo is one of our most ancient food-bearing plants. Today, you can grow varieties of the same two tomatillo species the Aztecs grew. *Physalis ixocarpa* is commonly sold in markets and has large (up to 2 ½-inch-diameter) tart green fruits, which ripen to pale yellow. *P. philadelphica* produces sweeter, marble-size purple fruits. This tomatillo species is a common field weed in Mexico, but it is no less delicious.

Choosing A Site

Select a spot with full sun exposure and well-drained, moderately rich soil. The tomatillo is a lighter feeder than tomatoes, and while they are tough semiwild plants, they do not fare well in soggy, poorly drained soil. Work a couple inches of compost into the soil before planting, and fork deeply to improve drainage. Raised beds work great for a tomatillo plant in gardens with heavy clay soil.

Planting

Start a tomatillo indoors six to eight weeks before your frost-free date. Harden off indoor-started plants before transplanting outdoors. Set out at the same time you plant your tomatoes, when all danger of frost is past and the soil is thoroughly warm.

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Much like its cousin the tomato, the tomatillo sprouts roots along the stems, so it profits from being planted deeply. The indeterminate, sprawling tomatillo plants grow 3 to 4 feet tall and at least as wide, so space the tomatillo plants 3 feet apart in rows 3 to 4 feet apart. Plan to give them support unless you want to pick the fruits off the ground. Two to four tomatillo plants are sufficient for fresh use.

Growing

Tomatillos are hugely prolific and fruit nonstop until laid low by frost. Apply 2 to 3 inches of organic mulch, such as grass clippings, to suppress weeds and conserve soil moisture. Although moderately drought-tolerant, tomatillos do best with an inch or so of water per week. If space is limited, pinch off the growing tips to control spread.

Master's tip: When frost threatens, pull up your tomatillo plants and hang them upside down in an unheated garage. The tomatillo fruits will keep for at least a couple of months.

Harvesting

You'll be preparing your first *salsa verde* about 75 to 100 days after transplanting. Pick the tomatillo fruits when they fill out their husks and the husks just begin to split. If the tomatillo fruits feel like mini marbles inside loose husks, wait awhile, but harvest before they turn pale yellow, as they become seedier and their flavor loses the desired tanginess as they ripen. Store harvested tomatillo fruits in their husks at room temperature for up to a week or in the refrigerator for up to three weeks.

Newbie hint: Harvest all your tomatillo fruits to prevent a forest of self-sown seedlings next year. Consign overripe and rotten tomatillo fruits to your hot compost heap.

Recommended Varieties

Toma Verde is the standard large-fruited tomatillo variety, with golf-ball-size, tart green tomatillo fruits. They're ready extra early, at 60 days from transplanting. Purple tomatillo varieties have small, intensely tomatillo purple fruits and green husks. They're highly decorative and long-storing and are ready at 65 days from transplant.

Upkeep

Though tomatillos seem exotic, they are ideal for beginning gardeners, because they rarely suffer disease and insect pest problems. Cage the tomatillo plants off the ground to allow air to circulate—which protects them from diseases, such as early blight—and to keep them out of reach of slugs and snails.

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The tomatillo plants aren't as heavy as tomato plants, and the undersize wire cages typically sold for tomatoes work fine for supporting tomatillos.

Problem Solving

Tomatillos are not self-pollinating like their tomato cousins. In order for the tomatillo flowers to set fruit, you must grow at least two tomatillo plants. Otherwise, you'll be left with lots of pretty little yellow flowers and none of the tasty green fruit.

Preparation Techniques

Preparing tomatillos for cooking or storage is easy. Just remove the papery husks and wash the sticky tomatillo fruits inside. Tomatillos need no coring or seeding before being incorporated into your favorite recipe. To freeze, simply place washed, dry tomatillo fruits in freezer bags and seal. Although tomatillos are usually cooked, they can also be eaten raw. Garden-fresh tomatillos add zest and unique flavor to hot sauces, salsas, and dips. Break out your favorite Mexican cookbook and try some new recipes, or use these ideas as inspiration.

Guacamole Light

Make a lower-calorie guacamole by replacing half the avocado with chopped raw tomatillo fruits.

Smoky Salsa Verde

Roast a large unpeeled onion, five unpeeled garlic cloves, two to five chile peppers (such as serrano, poblano, or anaheim), and 1 pound tomatillos on a charcoal grill or in a heavy, ungreased skillet on top of the stove until charred and soft. Peel the onion, garlic, and peppers and cut into chunks. Pulse all ingredients briefly in a food processor along with sea salt, a handful of cilantro, and a generous squirt of fresh lime juice. Serve with chips or use to smother cheese enchiladas.

Crisp Fried Tomatillos

Halve the fruits. Beat an egg with a ½ cup of milk. Prepare a shallow bowl of seasoned flour and another of cornmeal. Toss the fruits first in flour, then in the egg mixture, then roll in cornmeal. Fry in olive oil in a nonstick skillet until crisp and golden.

Green Rice

Puree 2½ cups raw tomatillos with ten cilantro sprigs. Measure 2 cups of this puree. In a medium saucepan, sauté a finely chopped small onion in 1 tablespoon olive oil until soft. Add 1 cup rice and cook, stirring, five minutes

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longer. Add the puree and 1 teaspoon salt, cover, and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to low and cook 20 to 30 minutes, until all liquid is absorbed.

Terrific Trio

Combine tomatillos, cilantro, and onion for a classic salsa combo.

Roasted Salsa Verde

Ingredients:

- 5 pounds **tomatillo** [1] fruits, husked and halved*
- 2 small onions, chopped
- 1 1/2 tablespoons chopped **garlic** [2]
- 1 1/2 tablespoons kosher salt
- 3 **habanero** [3] chile peppers, seeded and chopped
- 2 'Anaheim' chile peppers, seeded and chopped
- 2 pasilla chile peppers, seeded and chopped
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh cilantro
- Grated zest and juice of 1 lime

Directions:

1. Place the tomatillos cut side down on a baking sheet and set 4 inches below a very hot broiler. Once charred, flip and roast on the other side. Allow to cool.
2. Transfer the charred tomatillos plus their collected juices to a food processor. Add the onions, garlic, salt, peppers, cilantro, and lime. Pulse.
3. Pour into a large saucepan and bring to a boil, stirring frequently to prevent burning. Reduce the heat to low and simmer for 10 minutes.
4. Ladle into jars, leaving 1/2 inch headspace. Check for air bubbles, wipe the rims, and seal. Process for 15 minutes, adjusting for elevation.

Makes 3 pints

Notes:

Store fresh tomatillos with husks in a paper bag in the refrigerator for 2 weeks. For longer storage, remove the husks; they'll keep in the refrigerator for up to 3 months.