



Easy Gardening

ATILLOS • TOMATILLOS • TOMATILLOS • TOMATILLOS

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The tomatillo or husk tomato (*Physalis ixocarpa*) looks much like a tomato.

The fruit is generally green but can be orange, yellow, red, or even purple. It is enclosed in a papery wrapping called a calyx. The condition of the calyx is commonly used as an indicator of freshness in fresh markets.

Varieties

Tomatillos are not grown extensively in Texas. Seed companies carry a wide selection of varieties, including 'Cape Gooseberry', 'Golden Nugget', 'Mayan Husk Tomato', 'Mexican Husk', and 'Rendidora', which is an improved cultivar.

Soil

Tomatillos prefer well-drained, sandy loam soils with a pH between 5.5 and 7.3. They do not do well in wet conditions. In general, they grow in any soil that is suitable for tomatoes.

Climate

Native to Mexico and Guatemala, tomatillos are sensitive to cold. The best growing conditions are 80 to 90°F days with 60 to 70°F nights, low humidity, and sparse rainfall.

Propagation

Tomatillos are normally planted as seed. About 2¼ oz of seed is sufficient to plant an acre.

Commercial operations in the United States use transplants. Tomatillos are seeded in a greenhouse and sold as 3-week old transplants. Cuttings can also be used as they root very easily.

Planting

Space 'Rendidora' 16 inches between the plants and 4 feet between the rows.

For other varieties, plant every 2 feet in

TABLE 1. Common pests and diseases of tomatillos

Pests		
Name	Damage	Control
Cutworms <i>Agrotis segetumora</i>	Larva feeding inside the fruit and on the stems and leaves	azadirachtin, abamectin, bifenthrin, cyhalothrin, deltamethrin, flubendiamide, carbaryl, gamma-lambda-cyhalothrin
Root-knot nematode <i>Meloidogyne</i> sp.	Wilting caused by galls created on the roots	Nematicide
Tobacco budworm <i>Heliothis virescens</i>	Larva feeding inside the fruit	<i>Bt</i> subspecies <i>kurstaki</i> strain HD1
Whiteflies <i>Trialeurodes vaporariorum</i>	Feeding on the leaf underside; also can transmit disease-causing organisms	azadirachtin, pyrethrin
Diseases		
Name	Damage	Control
Black spot <i>Diplocarpon</i>	Black lesions, primarily on the leaves but can spread to the fruit	Fungicide
Tobacco mosaic virus	Wilting, dwarfing, loss of yield	Quarantine

rows 5 feet apart. If you are starting with seeds, plant 3 or 4 tomatillo seeds 2 feet apart. When the plants reach 4 to 5 inches tall, thin them to one plant every 2 feet.

Insects and diseases

Tomatillos have only a few serious insect pests and diseases (Table 1). Insect pests include cutworms, root-knot nema-



Figure 1. A tomatillo plant can produce 60 to 200 fruits during a growing season.

tode, tobacco budworm, and whiteflies. Common diseases are black spot and tobacco mosaic virus.

Harvesting

The plants begin bearing fruit 65 to 85 days after seeding or transplanting and continue for 1 to 2 months or until the first frost. The fruit are picked just as the husk, or calyx, bursts. If left on the plant too long, the flavor and quality will suffer.

Harvesting is done by hand, typically every day.

A plant may produce 60 to 200 fruits in a growing season (Fig. 1). An average yield is 2½ pounds per plant, or about 9 tons per acre.

In commercial operations, the tomatillos are placed in 10-pound cartons in the field. The fruit is then set out for 2 weeks to let the husks dry.

Storage

After the 2-week drying period, the cartons can be stacked and stored at 55 to 60°F and 85 to 90 percent humidity for up to 3 weeks.

Uses

Tomatillos are used primarily for fresh consumption. They are often used in soups and sauces, most notably in green sauces for Mexican and Guatemalan dishes. Some tomatillos are preserved as jam or canned whole for later use (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Tomatillos are often used in Mexican dishes, such as green sauces for enchiladas verde, and green salsa dips for chips.

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