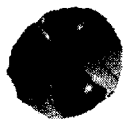




# Fact sheet

New Crops for the Home Garden Series



## Tomatillos



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**T**omatillos (*tom-ah-TEE-yos*) are a wonderful addition to the home garden because they are easy to grow and a key ingredient of fresh Mexican cuisine. Originally harvested in Central Mexico over 3,000 years ago as a wild plant, the tomatillo became a cultivated food crop, and was taken to Europe by the Spaniards. In the last century, a strong following developed in the Southwestern United States which gradually spread across the country in the last decade.

Tomatillos (*Physalis ixocarpa* or *P. spp.*) are related to other solaneous crops such as tomato, pepper, potato, and eggplant. Tomatillos have acquired a confusing array of common names including toma verde, husk tomato, Mexican green tomato, and miltomate. Looking like a small green tomato, this sticky green fruit is hidden inside a papery husk. Tomatillos grow on an indeterminate annual bush 2–5 feet high, and bear prolifically throughout the summer.

### Garden Preparation and Planting

Tomatillos can be seeded directly into the soil in late May but transplants set at that time produce earlier fruit and higher yields. About 4–6 weeks before the first frost-free date in your area, plant the seeds indoors in a sterile potting mix about 1/8 inch deep. Keep the mix warm and damp, and seedlings should germinate in about ten days. Provide plenty of windowsill or artificial light. After germination, harden off seedlings outside in a sheltered area for 5–7 days before transplanting.

Before planting, select a well-drained site that receives full sun. Have your soil tested, and apply lime for 6.5 pH and fertilizer, according to test recommendations. In the absence of a soil test, apply ¼ pound of 10-10-10 per 50 square feet, and incorporate 4–5 inches deep into the soil.

When planting, leave 30–36 inch spacing within the row and 3–5 foot spacing between rows. In order to support the vine and prevent sprawling, install a trellis system. Tomatillos need about 1 inch of water once a week. Mulch for even moisture and weed control. After first harvest, side dress about ½ cup per plant of 5-10-10 fertilizer to encourage continued flowering and fruiting.

Variety	Days to Mature	Color	Comments
Cisneros	62-75	Bright green	Very large fruit
DeMilpa	62-70	Purple bluish	Heirloom
Purple	62-75	Purple	Sweet yet tart
Pineapple	70-75	Green-yellow	Small, fruity
Toma verde	62-75	Bright green	Sweet yet tart
Verde puebla	62-75	Green-yellow	Very

### Pest Problems

Tomatillos have fewer pest problems compared to other garden vegetables. The protective husk (calyx) covering the fruit, sticky skin surface, and tart taste, discourage pest attack. Cultural practices effectively add to this protection. Slug and snail damage are minimized by raising the plants off the ground through trellising, staking, or caging. Such support also decreases disease problems by reducing humidity and wetness around the foliage. Foliage blights and wilts brought on by warm, rainy weather can be preventatively managed with ample spacing between plants to increase ventilation, air movement, and leaf drying.

Tomato hornworm and other chewing caterpillar pests can be hand-picked off or use early season sprays of Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis*). Occasionally, sucking insects as



aphids, whiteflies, and spider mites can be carefully removed with a high-pressure hose or with the use of an insecticidal soap solution.

## Harvest

The fruiting period ranges from 62–125 days after transplanting. Harvest tomatillos when their green husks change to a tan color and begin to split revealing a ripening fruit. Gently squeeze the husk beforehand to check size and firmness. The firm green fruit is typically tart and tangy at this time but will rapidly sweeten and yellow if left longer. This vine-ripened fresh flavor is superior to imported produce that is picked earlier for market transport. Your garden should provide a steady supply of tomatillos for two months until frost.

## Nutrition and Health

Tomatillos provide an excellent source of vitamins A and C, and potassium. They are low in calories and contain no fat, sodium, or cholesterol.

## Food Preparation

Your plentiful harvest of tomatillos can be stored in the refrigerator for about a month un-husked in a brown paper bag. When ready to use, place in warm water for a minute which will help remove the husk and sticky surface on the fruit. The taste of a tomatillo can be described as a lemon and tomato combination. Tomatillos can be made into “salsa verde,” a cooked green sauce, or added raw to any salads or salsa. Other fresh salsa companions such as hot peppers, tomato, cilantro, and onion can be grown alongside in your garden.

## Seed Sources

Seed can be saved from the best plants in your garden for the next season. Carefully mash the fruit in water and skim off the floating debris. The heaviest seeds are the best and many will sink to the bottom. Remove seeds, pat dry, and store in a cool, dry place. Seed catalogs offer varieties with special colors, flavors, and sizes. Several seed companies sell tomatillo seed and plants, some of these sources are listed below.

Seed Company	Telephone	Web Site
Baker Creek	417-924-8917	<a href="http://www.rareseeds.com">www.rareseeds.com</a>
Burpee Seeds	800-333-5808	<a href="http://www.burpee.com">www.burpee.com</a>
Native Seeds	520-622-5561	<a href="http://www.nativeseeds.org">www.nativeseeds.org</a>
Reimer Seeds	704-644-3762 fax	<a href="http://www.reimerseeds.com">www.reimerseeds.com</a>
Territorial Seed Company	541-942-9547	<a href="http://www.territorialseed.com">www.territorialseed.com</a>
Tomato Growers	888-478-7333	<a href="http://www.tomatogrowers.com">www.tomatogrowers.com</a>

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