

June 29, 2016



Tomatillo: The Little “Tomato” That Could  
By Paula Bertram and Suzanne Surburg

UCCE Master Gardener and Master Gardener/Master Food Preserver of El Dorado County

Last spring, while puttering about at the horse stable, we spotted a scraggly collection of plants growing in a rock driveway around a drainage grate. Further investigations showed many of the same plants in various locations: horse paddocks, ditches, manure piles. Sun or shade, they were everywhere!

A few weeks later, there was a minor panic when a small child was discovered eating a green fruit while her mother was riding. Mom was very anxious about it being poisonous. Lo and behold, those straggly plants were now producing small green fruits with papery husks -- tomatillos! How did they come to be growing at a horse stable? Nobody quite knew, but one plausible theory is that they had “escaped” from the kitchen of Fernando, the barn manager who lives on the premises.

Fortunately, the mom was not unjustified in her concerns. Tomatillos (as well as tomatoes, eggplant and potatoes) are members of the nightshade family (also known as *Solanaceae* family of plants of which some members are toxic). These are plants with a long cultivation history, and were apparently first grown by the Aztecs. The early Spanish explorers introduced them to Europe. Tomatillos are popular in Mexican and Central American cuisine and are found in many local markets here in El Dorado County.

Free plants! Being a cheapskate, something-for-nothing type, a few small plants were immediately “liberated,” put in a bag with some shavings, and re-homed in the author’s garden. They flourished, producing cute yellow flowers and a bumper crop of small to medium fruits encased in papery husks. Tomatillos (*Physalis phildephica*) aka “Mexican husk tomato” will grow wherever regular tomatoes will grow (and places that tomatoes won’t, too) The plants tend to sprawl. Providing some support keeps the fruits from molding on the ground, but we didn’t bother. They are not the same genus/species as true tomatoes (*Lycopersicon esculenta*), so you don’t need to worry about cross pollination/ inadvertent hybridization. If the horse facility is any

June 29, 2016

indication, they self-seed readily and will not need replanting. However, some Master Gardeners contend that allowing tomatillos to self-seed each year results in smaller fruit. No worries, the seedlings are easy to pull up. Now that's my kinda plant! Of course, if there is no free source, tomatillo seeds are readily available and can be started from seed just as you would other vegetables.

Tomatillos make excellent fresh salsa and cooked sauces. Most recipes use them in their firm green "unripe" condition. They are ready to harvest when the fruit fills up the papery husk. The skin can vary from green to yellow to a light purple. The flesh will be a pale ivory and a bit drier than a normal tomato.

Try throwing them whole into a stew with pork and corn kernels. Just remember to remove the paper husks before processing. Liven up a tomato salad by adding a few sliced tomatillos to add color and tart taste. They will turn paler green or light yellow as they ripen, and assume a slighter sweet taste. If some get a little ripe, there are recipes for preserves or jams as well. Did I mention they freeze beautifully? Just throw them whole into a baggie for future use.

Here are some recipes developed by our own Master Food Preservers, to help you use these hardy low maintenance little beauties.

A summer garden is not complete without a few tomatillo plants. With a little luck and good weather one can preserve the harvest for use throughout the winter. Fortunately last summer provided my family with enough tomatillos to last all year. Prior to preserving any product, please read about the process on either <http://nchfp.uga.edu/index.html> or <http://www.freshpreserving.com/>

A few suggestions for preserving your harvest:

Freeze whole, remove the outer husk, wash well, and blanch in boiling water for 30-45 seconds. Immediately put into an ice water bath to stop the cooking process. Drain, and dry tomatillos, place in a single layer on a tray. Put into your freezer. When the tomatillos are completely frozen, put them into a zip-lock freezer bag, remove the air, and seal. Freezing on a tray in a single layer makes it possible to remove only the amount of product one needs for a recipe and save the remainder. Blanching stops enzyme growth and helps retain color.

Canning tomatillo salsa—below is a recipe from the *USDA Complete Guide to Home Canning*.

### **Tomatillo Green Salsa**

5 cups chopped tomatillos (or green tomatoes may be used)  
1-1/2 cups seeded, chopped long green chiles  
1/2 cup seeded, finely chopped jalapeño peppers  
4 cups chopped onions  
1 cup bottled lemon juice

June 29, 2016

6 cloves garlic, finely chopped  
1 tbsp ground cumin (optional)  
3 tbsp oregano leaves (optional)  
1 tbsp salt  
1 tsp black pepper  
**Yield:** About 5 pints

**Procedure: Caution: Wear plastic or rubber gloves and do not touch your face while handling or cutting hot peppers. If you do not wear gloves, wash hands thoroughly with soap and water before touching your face or eyes.** Combine all ingredients in a large saucepan and stir frequently over high heat until mixture begins to boil, then reduce heat and simmer for 20 minutes, stirring occasionally. Ladle hot salsa into hot pint jars, leaving ½ inch headspace. Remove air bubbles and adjust headspace if needed. Wipe rims of jars with a dampened clean paper towel. Adjust lids and process in a boiling-water or atmospheric steam canner for 15 minutes at 1-1000', 20 minutes at 1,001-6,000', and 25 minutes above 6,000'.

There is no Master Gardener class this Saturday -- enjoy your Fourth of July weekend! Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions at local Farmers Markets, and Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu/mgenews/>. You can also find us on Facebook.