



Ground Cherries

(*Physalis pruinosa*)

By Lynne Marie Sullivan, Master Gardener

Ground cherries (*Physalis pruinosa*) are an easy-to-grow fruit that is not well known outside Quebec and the Maritimes. Also known as husk tomatoes, they originated in South America and grow wild in parts of the US and Canada where they were a seasonal food of indigenous Americans. Explorer Samuel de Champlain and his crew reportedly gathered ground cherries on their travels along the eastern seaboard.



Ground cherries have an unusual but very sweet flavour that seems to blend a cherry tomato with a piña colada. They can be eaten fresh or baked in a pie, and make a lovely marmalade or jam. They can also be used in spicy salsas, dessert sauces, and dipped in chocolate.

The Plant

The fruits resemble their close cousin, the tomatillo. Both are in the nightshade (*Solanaceae*) family. The *Aunt Molly's* variety, from Poland does well in cooler climates like Ontario. *Goldie* has a flavour more like pineapple, but matures more slowly. Some wild varieties are not edible, and it is best to purchase seed from a reputable grower.

Seed germination can be somewhat poor (50-60%); but once started, the plants are quite easy to grow. Start seeds indoors about 8 weeks before the average last frost date. Barely cover the seeds with soil. They take about 2 weeks to germinate, and seem to benefit from bottom-heat, as with a seed mat, or on top of the refrigerator. Harden-off the seedlings before transplanting outdoors around the first of June.

Ground cherries need full sun, consistent moisture, good drainage, and lots of space. They grow in average soil with no added fertilizer. They can also be grown in containers that are at least 2 feet wide and deep.

The seed packet for the *Aunt Molly's* variety indicates it will grow up to 4 feet in diameter, but this author's trials easily doubled that. Each plant naturally forms a sprawling ground-cover about 2 feet tall. Mulch, such as straw or dark biodegradable plastic, make harvesting easier and keep the berries clean when they drop from the vine. Some gardeners use stout cages as vertical supports if garden space is limited.

The berries develop in husks that resemble Chinese lanterns, their botanical cousins. The berries begin to drop from the vine in early August. Gather the fallen fruits daily (kids love doing this.) If the daily harvest is not enough for a recipe, just freeze them (see below) until you have the quantity required. The plants continue to bear fruit until frost. A single plant can produce *several hundred* fruits!

The Fruit

Use only fully ripe berries since those that are under-ripe can play havoc with the digestive system. The fruit begins to drop from the plant 65-70 days after transplanting, often before the berries are truly ripe. If the husks are still yellowish-green, continue ripening them by laying them in a single layer a clean towel *with their husks intact*, and away from direct sun. In a few days, the husks will become papery, somewhat transparent, and turn deep amber or tan. At that point, remove the husks, rinse the berries, and enjoy them fresh or freeze in a sealed bag or container. Alternatively, the fruits can be left in their husks will stay fresh for several weeks when stored in a cool place.

Pests

In warm climates, *Physalis pruinosa* is a perennial, but it is not hardy in Ontario and treated as an annual.

Pests and diseases are generally not a problem with ground cherries. At the end of the season, clean up any fallen fruit since they have a reputation for re-seeding themselves the following year. Remove and compost all of the foliage from the garden. Rotate your crops to avoid planting ground cherries where crops of the same family were grown the previous year including tomatoes, potatoes, peppers or eggplant.

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