



Ground Cherries

Crow Wing County Master Gardeners *Giving Gardens* Guide to Ground Cherries

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DESCRIPTION

Ground cherries are often called cape gooseberries. They are closely related to the tomatillo, although the ground cherry is a small, sweet fruit inside a paper husk lantern. The ripe fruit may range in color from yellow to gold or orange and is perfect for snacks, preserves, dessert toppings or as a base for an interesting salsa. Ground cherries have just 53 calories for 3.5 oz and are a good source of Vitamins A, C and B3/Niacin. ☠ A note of caution: leaves and unripe fruits are poisonous and even fatal if ingested by humans.

PLANT SITE REQUIREMENTS

Sun	Full Sun - six plus hours of sun daily
Soil	Have soil tested. Apply phosphorus (P) and potassium (K) as recommended by the soil test recommendations. Improve soil by adding well-rotted manure or compost in the spring or fall.
Soil Temp	Transplant seedlings after the average last frost date and when the soil temperature is 70 degrees.
Uses	Ground cherries can be eaten fresh, processed into jam or baked into pies. Their distinctive, sweet-tart taste is a nice addition to preserves, sauces and tarts.

PLANT SELECTION

Indeterminate – Ground cherries continue to grow all season and continue producing fruit until killed by frost

Days to Maturity - 70-75 days

Varieties– “Goldie”, “Pineapple” and Aunt Molly’s” are all good varieties for Minnesota gardens.

PLANTING RECOMMENDATIONS

- Start seeds indoors six to seven weeks before the last spring frost; usually early April. Transplant seedlings into the garden after the soil is warm and danger of frost has passed.
- Ground cherry plants are shorter than 30 inches but sprawl rather than grow upright.
- Space plants 24 inches apart.
- Ground cherries self-seed in the garden. If fallen fruit is not cleaned up, volunteer plants may appear the next year.

MAINTENANCE

Watering – The plants have strong root systems and need one inch of water per week. Soak the soil thoroughly when watering, once or twice a week. Do not overhead water as wet leaves are more disease prone. Drip irrigation is best.

Fertilization – Apply phosphorus (P) and potassium (K) according to soil test recommendations. Too much nitrogen can cause plants to grow more leaves than flowers.

Disease - Ground cherries are vulnerable to many of the diseases that affect potatoes, tomatoes, peppers and eggplants. Ground cherries are part of the ‘nightshade’ family so practice crop rotation to reduce disease problems. Verticillium wilt can cause yellowing and wilt on ground cherries.

Insects – Cutworms can chew stems of young transplants at the soil line. To discourage, place a strip of paper around the young stem. Tomato hornworm and Colorado potato beetle may also cause problems.

Temperature Requirements – Ground cherries are sensitive to temperature fluctuations. Temperatures above 90 degrees or below 55 degrees can cause flowers to abort.

Harvest – Fruits must be fully ripe to be edible. At maturity, the husks become dry and papery and the fruits drop from the plants. Mature fruits should be collected from the ground after they have fallen. The husk is inedible and must be removed.

Storing – Ground cherries have a long shelf life. When left in the husk, they will keep for a week or two at room temperature or up to 3 months if stored in a mesh bag in a cool place.

Toxicity ☠ – Leaves and unripe fruits are poisonous and even fatal if ingested by humans.

Questions or problems – go to <http://www.extension.umn.edu/yard-and-garden> and look for “Plant Diseases” – “What Insect is this?” – “What’s wrong with my Plant?” – “Is this Plant a Weed?”

Grandma Ott's Ground Cherry Jam

Diane Ott Whealy, Seed Savers Exchange

Ingredients

4 cups ripe ground cherries, husked and crushed	1½ teaspoon butter
5 cups sugar	¼ cup lemon juice
1 box powdered fruit pectin (I use Sure-Jell)	Zest of half a lemon

Instructions

1. Place crushed ground cherries, butter, lemon juice, and zest in large saucepan with fruit pectin.
2. Bring to a full boil (a boil that continues when stirred).
3. Add sugar, continue stirring, bring back to full boil and cook for 3 minutes.
4. Remove from heat and skim off foam.
5. Let mixture cool completely in kettle, stirring occasionally, and freeze in frost-proof containers.
Or
6. Pour hot jam immediately into hot, sterile jars, being sure to leave enough headspace to ensure a vacuum seal; cap with lids and rings.
7. Process in hot-water bath, half-pints for 5 minutes and pints for 10 minutes.

Ground Cherry Jam

Ingredients

3 cups ripe ground cherries, husked
½ to ¾ cup of sugar
2 tablespoons of lemon juice

Instructions

1. Husk cherries, place in a large saucepan.
2. Add lemon juice and cook over low heat until cherries pop, stirring often.
3. Add sugar, stir and cook over medium heat for 15 minutes. Continue to stir as needed.
4. Cool and pour into small containers with covers.
5. Store in refrigerator.