

GROUND CHERRIES

By Michelle Summer Fike

Ever since I ran a vegetable CSA in the '90s, I've been interested in unusual garden plants. I look for crops that are well adapted to our northern climate, produce heavily, are easy to grow and taste wonderful.

I discovered several plants that add flair and discovery to our CSA boxes. These include kohlrabi, mizuna, Blackstrap and Red Russian kale, pattypan squash, Rat-tail radish, arugula, cilantro, tomatillos, shungiku and ground cherries.

Over the past decade, some of these plants have become quite popular in the local food movement in Nova Scotia, while others remain obscure. This article sings the praises of the small, tasty little ground cherry, a plant that deserves to be in the garden of everyone who loves fresh, delicious, Canadian-grown, organic produce.

Ground cherries (*Physalis pruinosa* and *P. peruviana*) are nightshades, members of the Solanaceae family which includes the tomato. They are closely related to cape gooseberries, tomatillos and Chinese lanterns (all *Physalis* species). The most common variety is Aunt Molly's, a Polish heirloom prized for its blemish-free fruit, good size and wonderful flavour.

Ground cherry fruits are typically bright yellow-orange, the diameter of a dime to a nickel, and grow individually in tan-coloured papery husks. They are crisp and sweet, and the harvest period can last two months or more. Ground cherries store well for several weeks in their husks in paper bags in the fridge.

Ground cherries begin to ripen about 70 days after transplanting and continue producing until frost. Each plant can produce several hundred little fruit.

Two or three plants give a family fruit for fresh eating over several weeks. Six to eight plants give

plenty for preserving, baking, freezing and fresh eating. A market gardener would likely want at least ten plants.

Planting ground cherries

Ground cherries are easy to grow and harvest. Treat them as you would peppers or tomatoes. Start seeds indoors 6–8 weeks before the last frost date and provide adequate heat. Germination can be somewhat spotty and take up to two weeks, so plant generous amounts of seed. I add a quarter cup of composted seaweed per gallon of potting soil.

You can start seeds in trays or pots. Transplant them to six-pack cells at four to five weeks, and later to four-inch pots if you

won't be planting them out until the eight-week mark. Like all seedlings, vigorously growing younger transplants do better than larger seedlings that have been in their pots too long.



Ground cherries on the bush.

Patio gardening

Perhaps because their wild cousins thrive in dry, hot climates, ground cherries are perfectly happy in the high heat and well drained environment offered by a container or deck garden. The somewhat decorative plants are well suited to a patio because of their long harvest season and the fact they thrive in the extra heat offered near a house. I would use a container at least 2 gallons in size. A small trellis or tomato cage will keep the plants tidy.



Ground cherries in the husk.



I start my ground cherry seedlings in mid-April. Keep seedlings warm and well watered and allow the soil to almost dry out between watering—these heat-loving plants don't tolerate cold roots.

When the threat of a late spring frost has passed and conditions are right for planting tomatoes, basil, corn, peppers and beans, the weather is perfect for transplanting ground cherries. In late May or early June, I harden off transplants for at least five days. This adds to the workload in a busy season, but the reduction in transplant shock is well worth the extra effort.

To harden off, I put seedlings outside for a couple of hours on a fine day in a fairly sheltered loca-

tion, and then move them back indoors. The next day, I put them out for an afternoon. On the third day, I leave them out for most of the day. I repeat this on day four, but move the seedlings to a slightly more exposed location. On day five, I leave them out all day and night. Depending on weather and how well the plants are adjusting, I often give plants another few days of living outdoors in their pots before transplanting. The plants are well watered throughout the hardening off process.

I transplant ground cherries into beds in full sun. One-foot spacing can work for the sprawling plants if you use tomato cages to train the plants. Otherwise, give plants 18–24 inches in all direc-

tions. Additional space between plants makes harvesting easier and can promote better airflow, allowing plants to cope with dampness during a rainy summer.

I place a scoopful of mushroom compost in each hole, transplant the seedling, water and then mulch. Some gardeners grow ground cherries in marginal soil without adding compost.

Our ground cherries usually do not require any additional irrigation or fertilization throughout the growing season. Weeding is minimal due to good bed preparation and mulching. In very dry conditions, keep an eye on your plants and water thoroughly if they start to wilt. Ground cherries are a low maintenance crop requiring little care.

Troubleshooting

Ground cherries are hardy, pest-resistant plants when given ideal growing conditions—planted in well drained soil in full sun with enough space to ensure good ventilation. Cold, wet or poorly drained soils, inadequate heat,



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and prolonged dampness can stress these plants. Stressed plants are vulnerable to Colorado potato beetles, mildew, mould, improper fruit set, and other common tomato pests and diseases.

Raised beds help gardeners with heavy clay soils grow ground cherries successfully. Growing under a row cover or in a greenhouse or hoop house are good options for cool areas.

The flavour is often described as a blend between strawberry and pineapple, and called both 'wild' and 'exotic.'

Harvest

Ground cherries drop to the ground upon ripening. They can be gathered every day or two by scooping up handfuls of the husks under the plants. The water-conserving and weed-suppressing mulch leads to a tidy, clean harvest.

I heard about a gardener who leaves rags under her plants. She drags these out every few days, collects the fruit and then replaces the rags.

Saving seed

Saving seed from ground cherries is simple. Different varieties cross with one another, so only plant one variety within 100 metres of another. However, ground cherries will not cross with tomatillos, Chinese lanterns, cape gooseberries or other *Physalis* species.

Gather fruit for seed saving throughout the growing season—some early in the season, some mid-season, and some near frost-time. This way, you preserve a wide range of genetic variability.

Remove the paper husks from the fruit, place them in a blender (up to half full) with just enough water to cover, and blend on low speed for 20–30 seconds. The blades will not damage the tough, slippery seed coats. Next, fill the blender to the top with water, and allow the liquid to settle for 10–15 seconds. The viable seeds will settle to the bottom.

Ground cherry and chamomile jam

Adapted from one of my favourite blogs "Straight from the Farm"

6 cups husked ground cherries
3 cups sugar
1½ cups honey
½ cup water
1 lemon, juiced
2 cups chamomile infusion

Combine sugar, honey, water and lemon juice in a large heavy saucepan and bring to a boil. Add ground cherries and simmer for 5 minutes or until most have burst. Remove from heat and mash with a large spoon to break up fruit.

Transfer to a large bowl and cover with parchment paper or a heavy tea towel (don't let it touch the fruit). Refrigerate for at least three hours or overnight.

Make a chamomile infusion by putting 2¼ cups water in a pot and adding either 2 chamomile tea bags, 2 tablespoons fresh flowers, or 2 teaspoons dried chamomile flowers. Bring to just before a boil, turn off heat, and keep covered until cool. Refrigerate if you are leaving it overnight.

Strain two cups of fruit mixture through a fine mesh strainer. Transfer strained liquid with the unstrained fruit mixture back to the saucepan and return to a boil. Add two cups chamomile infusion and simmer until it reaches jam consistency. The jam can now be canned, frozen or refrigerated.

Recipe makes 4–5 jars.

Ground cherry pie

4 cups husked ground cherries
2 cups sugar
2 Tbsp. flour
½ tsp. cinnamon
¼ tsp. nutmeg
2 Tbsp. melted butter
2 Tbsp. lemon juice
Enough pastry for a lattice-topped 9-inch pie

Preheat oven to 350°F. Combine sugar, flour, cinnamon and nutmeg. Add ground cherries and stir to coat. Add melted butter and lemon juice, stir again. Pour into unbaked pie crust, cover with strips of dough to form a lattice topping (a plain crust can also be used, with a few slits cut in the top). Bake for 45 to 55 minutes, or until the crust is golden.

Ground cherry salsa

1 pint of ground cherries, cut in half
½ red onion, diced
½ cucumber, diced
¼ jalapeno pepper, diced
2 sweet peppers, diced (ideally, of two different colours)
1 large bunch cilantro, coarsely chopped
1 small fresh squeezed lime juice
1 Tbsp. extra virgin olive oil
1 small pinch sea salt

Mix together and let sit for 30 minutes so the flavours come together. Do not overdo the salt or lime. The small amount of salt is needed to draw the liquid out of the ground cherries.

Pour off half the contents of the blender, stir, allow to settle for another 10–15 seconds, and then pour off most of the water. You'll see the seeds at the bottom. Repeat until only seeds and water are left. Pour the remaining water and seeds through a sieve.

Use a towel or rag to rub the bottom of the sieve, absorbing extra water off the seeds. Then dump the seeds onto a plate, baking dish or cookie sheet. Avoid anything with high sides that will prevent good air flow. Label with the variety name and date, and allow to dry for 5–14 days (depending on air humidity). Stir daily to keep seeds from sticking to the tray or each other. Store completely dry seeds in an airtight container in a cold, dark, dry basement, fridge or freezer. The seeds are viable for three years or longer.

Ground cherries in the kitchen

The flavour of ground cherries is often described as a blend between strawberry and pineapple, and called both 'wild' and 'exotic.' I

find them sweet and slightly tart all at once, perfect on the palate. They are plump and solid like a cherry, not soft like a raspberry. They have tiny seeds but the texture is seedless, like a nice seedless grape. They are juicy like a cherry tomato. I like them cold out of the fridge, but they get gobbled up by our children and interns alike in the gardens on a hot summer day.

Ground cherries can be dried like raisins, or preserved in jams, salsas, marmalades and chutneys. They can be baked in pies, cooked into sauce for ice cream or cheesecake, dipped in a chocolate fondue, made into a variety of dazzling desserts including *flognarde*, or diced and eaten with yogurt and granola. I've seen them used as a simple but elegant garnish in upscale restaurants with the inside-out husk attached.

Ground cherries also freeze very well, husked and popped

whole into bags, allowing you to enjoy the fresh flavour of this amazing little fruit throughout the winter.

Michelle Summer Fike gardens in Welsford, Nova Scotia, and is the owner of Pumpkin Moon Farm, an organic herb and seed farm (which sells seed for ground cherries). www.pumpkinmoonfarm.com

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