

Love Fresh Salsa? Plant A Salsa Garden

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URBANA — The secret to salsa from scratch is using the freshest ingredients straight from a homegrown garden. [Andrew Holsinger](#), a [University of Illinois Extension](#) horticulture educator says even those without a lot of outdoor space can grow salsa ingredients on a patio or porch.

“While planting seeds in the ground gives you the best opportunity to pick custom cultivars for your personal preferences, most of these ingredients can also be grown in containers,” says Holsinger.

Tomatoes, onions, peppers, garlic, and cilantro are key components of a salsa garden. Other plants include oregano, scallions, and cucumbers.

Holsinger advises planting vegetables and herbs according to your local hardiness zone and fertilizing throughout the growing season. Plant in full sun and well-drained soil for best results and water at the base of the plant will help gardeners avoid diseases from soil splashed onto leaves.

As the base ingredient, tomato variety has an impact on taste and the amount of liquid. For a thicker salsa, use paste tomatoes such as ‘Roma,’ ‘Marzano,’ ‘Veeroma,’ and ‘Viva Italia.’ For a thinner, watery salsa, use slicing varieties, such as ‘Celebrity,’ ‘Better Boy,’ ‘Big Beef,’ and ‘Floramerica.’ Choose disease-resistant varieties.

Tomatoes are a warm-season vegetable that should be planted about two weeks after the average last frost date when soil temperatures stay above 60°F.

Tomatillos, also called Mexican ground cherries or Mexican husk tomatoes, are often used as a thickening agent in salsa or as the basis for a salsa verde. A sprawling relative of the tomato, tomatillo plants may be trained by pruning to stay within a designated area or container.

Peppers are tender warm-season vegetables that need higher temperatures than tomatoes and will determine the degree of heat in a salsa. Select pepper varieties based on shape, color, and disease resistance. Peppers can be picked at any size, but they are usually harvested when the fruit is mature.

“Always exercise caution and wear plastic or rubber gloves when handling or picking hot varieties of peppers,” says Holsinger.

Onions are a cool-season vegetable. Holsinger advises planting long-day varieties in Northern Illinois and short-day varieties in Southern Illinois. There is also a newer day-neutral onion, which is between a short-day and long-day onion.

Garlic is a perennial that should be planted in the fall. It should be divided annually to get good sized bulbs. Plant individual cloves in well-drained soil for the largest bulbs. Hardneck varieties have larger cloves than the softneck varieties and are easier to peel. Holsinger recommends the hardneck varieties ‘Spanish Roja,’ ‘Carpathian,’ and ‘Georgian Crystal.’

Cilantro is an herb often used to flavor salsas. Pick cilantro before the plant flowers and plant it in succession to maintain a steady supply through the season.

SOURCE: [Andrew Holsinger](#), Horticulture Educator, University of Illinois Extension

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