



## It's Cilantro Planting Time!

by Susan Schieferle, UC Master Gardener

Cilantro is an ancient annual garden herb with a very distinctive scent and flavor. Cilantro, also called Chinese parsley or coriander, dates back 3,000 years to Egypt. The leaves are a mainstay of ethnic cuisines the world over and are used in many Mexican, Thai, Asian, and Indian recipes. After the cilantro plant blooms, seedpods develop and fall off. The seeds are known as coriander, which is another herb used in baking and desserts. By planting cilantro, you actually are getting two different herbs from one plant!

Cooler weather favors lush growth of cilantro leaves. Planting seeds now in early fall and again in early spring will generate a nice crop. How do you know which type of seeds to purchase? There are four main varieties. Confetti is a frilly-leaved version with a less pungent flavor. The information on the seed packet for Calypso, or Slow-Bolt (the most common variety in local stores), states that the plant grows slower so flowers do not “bolt” as quickly as other varieties. Santo is yet another type contending slow and steady growth. Organic seeds are another kind grown strictly without the use of synthetic fertilizers or pesticides.

Site selection will be your next step. The area needs to have at least 6 hours of sunlight daily. This herb loves moderately rich, well-drained soil. Therefore, before planting, be sure to amend your garden or container soil with purchased soil amendments or compost, or sifted homemade compost.

Planting seeds can be done in rows or in a square foot area. When planting in rows, plant seeds ½ inch deep and 3 to 4 inches apart. Rows should be 3 to 4 inches apart as well. If planting in a square foot area or a 12 inch container, 4 cilantro plants will grow nicely in this small space. Now, be patient! Germination can take 14 days or longer before tiny green shoots appear. If more than one seed germinates per hole, thin out the weakest ones and keep the strongest seedling.

Caring for your cilantro plant requires keeping consistent soil moisture. Mulching the top of the soil significantly helps to keep the moisture level constant. Organic mulches include previously living material such as chopped leaves, straw, grass clippings, compost, wood chips, shredded bark, sawdust, pine needles, and even paper. Over time, organic mulches will improve the garden soil texture. Pinching back the stems on young cilantro will produce fuller plants. If the plant flowers early, pinch off the flowers, which will help develop more leaves. If you want a continuous crop of cilantro, repeat this seeding process every 3 to 4 weeks.



Cilantro in a pot



Cilantro

Cilantro occasionally has problems with aphids and whitefly, wilt, and mildew. For the insects, use insecticidal soap. To prevent or control wilt and mildew, make sure you clean up spent cilantro plants at the end of the season, and remove any infected plants as soon as possible.

Harvesting begins when the plants are about 8 inches tall, which could be 30 to 60 days from seeding. Wash and wrap the gathered leaves in paper towels, put in a sealed plastic bag, and refrigerate for longer freshness. Remember that the plant will die off soon after the flowers and seeds appear. If you are saving the seeds for coriander, cut them off at the top of the stem after the seedpods turn brown. Place the seed pods in a paper bag in a dark, cool place for a few weeks.

Now the fun begins! Cooking with cilantro can add so many flavors to everyday salads and soups, as well as ethnic recipes. Consider using cilantro as a garnish on the dinner plate. Not only are the leaves beautiful, but they also emit a wonderful scent. Happy growing!

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