

Summertime Salsa...

Hot or Not?

By Jo Mercer

In the past few years, Latino-style salsas have replaced ketchup as the number-one condiment in the United States. I'm sure many of you have at least tasted commercial versions of salsa on a taco from a fast-food restaurant. There are many bottled, ready-to-use products on the store shelves, but home gardeners can make their own salsas.

The base of most salsas is derived from familiar garden plants, tomatoes and peppers. The more exotic ingredients include tomatillos - a tomato and pepper relative - and cilantro, sometimes called Chinese parsley.

Other ingredients to round out the homegrown list are onions, garlic, and oregano. At the end of this article, are some tested recipes for homemade salsas and chile sauces that are safe for canning. But let's talk first about what you'll grow in the salsa garden.

Since peppers and tomatoes are some of the most commonly grown vegetable plants, I'll not go into details on their culture. Rather, let's concentrate on some of the varieties you should try in your salsa garden.

Slicing tomatoes such as 'Better Boy' or 'Celebrity' are fine for many salsa recipes. 'Roma' and other paste or processing tomatoes give a less watery salsa product. Just grow tomatoes you like and have good results with. Anything will do for your salsa project.

Peppers are the kick that make a salsa recipe unique. Whether mild or searing, salsa needs this component to give it spice. Generally the smaller the fruit, the hotter the pepper. 'Long green chilies' in a recipe usually refer to one of the milder peppers. Choose from *Anaheim*, *Ancho (Poblano)*, *Colorado*, or *Hungarian Yellow Wax* peppers. Standard *green bell peppers* are acceptable too.

The bolder salsa aficionado will want *Cayenne*, *Habanero*, *Jalapeno*, *Serrano*, and *Tabasco* to heat things up. For a heat index somewhere in the middle, you could blend different pepper types in the recipe.

Cilantro is the leafy part of the herb plant which produces the sweet spice coriander. It is related to parsley and dill and, similarly, does best in cool weather. Cilantro's distinctive musky fragrance is an important feature in several Latino and Asian cuisines.

You can buy cilantro as a plant or grow from seed sown directly in the ground eight to ten weeks before you plan to harvest. Prepare a sunny spot in rich, well-drained soil. Afternoon shade may help reduce the plants tendency to bolt, or go to seed too soon in the heat of the summer. Look for a variety of cilantro bred for foliage rather than seed production. 'Slo-bolt' is one such variety.

Finish out the garden with your favorite slicing onions and garlic. In your herb garden, include oregano which gives a good "pizza" fragrance. If you really want to go all out for the salsa garden, try growing flint corn to grind into meal for tortillas. But that's another story.

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Important Note:

Most salsa recipes have not been safety-tested for home canning. We recommend that untested recipes be used only for fresh or frozen salsas. For the following recipes, it is important to follow the directions exactly. Do not alter the ratio of main ingredients. Use only bottled, not fresh, lemon juice. Do not substitute vinegar for the bottled lemon juice.

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Tomato/Green Chile Salsa

3 cups peeled, cored, chopped tomatoes
3 cups seeded, chopped long green chiles
¾ cup chopped onions
1 jalapeno pepper, seeded, finely chopped
6 cloves garlic, finely chopped
1 ½ cups vinegar
½ teaspoon cumin**
2 teaspoon dried oregano**
1 ½ teaspoons salt

Combine all ingredients in a large saucepan and heat, stirring frequently, until mixture boils. Reduce heat and simmer for 20 minutes, stirring occasionally. Ladle hot into pint jars, leaving ½ inch headspace, and process in boiling water canner for 15 minutes (up to 1,000 feet altitude); 20 minutes at 1,001 to 6,000 feet altitude; 25 minutes (above 6,000 feet altitude). Yield: 3 pints

Tomato Salsa (using paste tomatoes)

7 quarts peeled, cored chopped tomatoes
4 cups seeded, chopped, long green chiles
5 cups chopped onion
½ cup seeded, finely chopped jalapeno peppers
6 cloves garlic, finely chopped
2 cups bottled lemon juice
2 tablespoons salt
1 tablespoon black pepper
2 tablespoons ground cumin**
3 tablespoons dried oregano**
2 tablespoons fresh chopped cilantro**

Combine all ingredients except cumin, oregano and cilantro in a large pot and bring to a boil, stirring frequently, then reduce heat and simmer 10 minutes. Add herbs and simmer for another 20 minutes, stirring occasionally. Ladle hot into pint jars, leaving ½ inch headspace, and process in boiling water canner for 15 minutes (up to 1,000 feet altitude); 20 minutes a 1,001 to 6,000 feet altitude; 25 minutes (above 6,000 feet altitude). Yield: 13 pints

Tomato Taco Sauce

8 qt. peeled, cored, finely chopped paste tomatoes
2 cloves garlic, crushed
5 cups chopped onions
4 jalapeno peppers, seeded, chopped
4 long green chiles, seeded, chopped
2 ½ cups vinegar
2 Tablespoons salt
1 ½ tablespoons black pepper
1 tablespoon sugar
2 tablespoons dried oregano**
1 teaspoon ground cumin**

Combine ingredients in a large saucepan. Bring to a boil, then reduce heat and simmer, stirring frequently until thick (about 1 hour). Ladle hot into pint jars, leaving ½ inch headspace, and process in boiling water canner for 15 minutes (up to 1,000 feet altitude); 20 minutes a 1,001 to 6,000 feet altitude; 25 minutes (above 6,000 feet altitude). Yield: 11 pints

Hot-as-you-want Chile Salsa

10 cups peeled, cored, chopped tomatoes
6 cups seeded, chopped peppers (your choice)
4 cups chopped onions
1 cup vinegar
3 teaspoons salt
½ teaspoon black pepper

Combine ingredients in a large saucepan. Heat to a boil and simmer 10 minutes. Ladle hot into pint jars, leaving ½ inch headspace, and process in boiling water canner for 15 minutes (up to 1,000 feet altitude); 20 minutes a 1,001 to 6,000 feet altitude; 25 minutes (above 6,000 feet altitude). Yield: 7 pints

Tomato Salsa (using slicing tomatoes)

4 cups peeled, cored, chopped tomatoes
2 cups seeded, chopped long green chiles
½ cup seeded chopped jalapeno peppers
¾ cup chopped onions
4 cloves garlic, finely chopped
2 cups vinegar
1 teaspoon ground cumin**
1 tablespoon fresh chopped cilantro**
1 ½ teaspoon salt

Combine all ingredients in a large saucepan and bring to a boil, stirring frequently. Reduce heat and simmer 20 minutes, stirring occasionally. Ladle hot into pint jars, leaving ½ inch headspace, and process in boiling water canner for 15 minutes (up to 1,000 feet altitude); 20 minutes a 1,001 to 6,000 feet altitude; 25 minutes (above 6,000 feet altitude). Yield: 4 pints

** Amount variable according to taste.