



Seed Savers EXCHANGE

How to Grow Ground Cherries (*Physalis* spp.)

Commonly known as ground cherry, dwarf cape gooseberry, and strawberry tomato, this plant produces a small, yellow, edible berry surrounded by a papery husk. Ground cherries typically produce hundreds of fruit on each plant.

How/When to Start Indoors: Ground cherry plants are best started under cover and planted out. Sow seeds indoors 6–8 weeks before the last frost. Plant seeds ¼-inch deep.

Time to Germination: Seeds will germinate in 7–10 days.

When to Transplant: Plant outdoors two to four weeks after your last expected frost. (Check this [frost calendar](#) to determine the average last frost date for your area.) Be sure to harden off seedlings before planting outdoors. Plants prefer a rich, light, warm soil and a sunny position.

Spacing Requirements: Transplanting into the garden, space plants at least 2 feet apart. Ground cherries have a sprawling growth habit similar to tomatillos. Be sure to give plants plenty of space in the garden.

Special Considerations: If you have grown ground cherries before, you may not even need to plant this crop again as ground cherries often volunteer in the garden. Make sure that your soil is well fertilized as this crop is a heavy feeder and takes a lot of nutrients from the soil.

Common Pests and Diseases (and how to manage): Ground cherries are not susceptible to many bacterial, fungal, or viral diseases. However, plants do occasionally suffer damage from flea beetles, whiteflies, ground cherry leaf beetles, and mites. Keep plants regularly watered and place floating row covers over them if these pests are particularly prevalent in your garden.

Harvest (when and how): The fruits must be fully ripe to be edible. At maturity, the husks of fruits 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.

Eating: Ground cherries can be eaten fresh, processed into jam, and baked into pies. Their distinctive, sweet-tart taste lends itself to preserves, sauces, and tarts.

Storing: Compared to many fleshy fruits, ripe ground cherries have a long shelf life and can be held for several weeks, for both eating and seed saving.

How to Save Ground Cherry Seeds

Ground cherries typically produce hundreds of fruit on each plant so you need plant only one ground cherry plant to yield viable seeds.

Life Cycle: The ground cherry is an annual crop. It will complete its full life cycle—including germination, reproduction, and death—in a single growing season.

Recommended Isolation Distance: When saving seeds from ground cherries, separate varieties by 300–1,600 feet.

Recommended Population Sizes: You only need to plant one ground cherry plant in order to harvest viable seeds. To maintain a variety over many generations, save seeds from between 5–20 plants.

Harvesting: An individual ground cherry fruit can contain more than 100 seeds, so many gardeners stop harvesting for seed after gathering a few fruits from each plant in the population and simply continue to harvest only for consumption. It is easy to freeze husked whole ground cherry fruits.

Cleaning and Processing: *For large batches:* Ground cherry seeds can be processed by blending the fruits with ample water in a food processor. Remove the husks before processing to simplify the decanting process. To decant the mixture, pour the blended fruits into a larger container, add more water, and agitate the watery mash until the seeds separate from the pulp. When the seeds have settled to the bottom of the container, the pulpy water can be poured off the top, leaving only the seeds. Keep decanting this mixture until most of the pulp and any immature seeds have been discarded. The viable seeds that remain should be transferred to a very fine strainer, rinsed under a stream of water, and placed on a screen or coffee filter to dry in a cool, well-ventilated area. *For small batches:* Because ground cherry fruits are soft, small batches can be efficiently hand-processed by removing husks, cutting fruits, and squeezing the pulp and seeds into a bowl. The mixture can be mashed by hand, and decanted and rinsed as described above.

Storage and Viability: When stored under cool, dark, and dry conditions, ground cherry seeds will remain viable for 4–6 years.

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