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Tomatillos are a common ingredient in salsa verde and other Hispanic dishes.

Taste for tomatillos

Tomato relatives can grow easily in Oregon under the right conditions

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Question: What are the best methods for growing tomatillos in our area? My plants never produce much.

Answer: You might need two or more types of tomatillos to get good pollination. Once they start setting fruit, usually 75 days after transplanting, they will continue until fall rains or frost. Though they seem exotically tropical, tomatillos can be easily grown in Oregon wherever tomatoes can be grown, according to crop scientists at Oregon State University Extension Service.

A member of the tomato family, tomatillos have sticky green or purple-skinned fruit with a papery outer husk. Close relatives include the Chinese lantern plant, and the ground cherry or strawberry tomato.

Tomatillos are annual bushy plants, usually not more than 2 to 4 feet tall. They are somewhat drought tolerant but need even irrigation and will use 1 ½ inches of water per week. Drip or soaker hoses work well on tomatillos. They do not like soggy, poorly drained soil, so they benefit from raised beds or rows, both for drainage and the faster soil warming they provide.

Most tomatillos are started in green houses, hardened off and transplanted out, just like tomatoes. For several weeks, as the weather warms up, cover the transplants with plastic cloches or row covers to improve early growth and accelerate the time to first fruit.

Tomatillo plants are indeterminate – they keep flowering and bearing fruit until the frost knocks them out. Since the overall size or caliper of their stems is smaller than tomatoes, tomatillos do not weigh as much as tomato plants. So, tomatillos training systems can be somewhat less substantial than those used for tomatoes.

A stake and string ties suit tomatillos well. Tomatillo fruit can be as small as a half inch in diameter or up to 2 to 3 inches, depending on the variety. Varieties include purple, miltomate, Mexican strain and pineapple. Fully ripe fruit falls easily off the plant when picked. They are ready to harvest when the fruit begins to break through the papery husk, an average of 55 to 75 growing days until harvest. They will last up to three weeks in the refrigerator.

Planted in the spring and harvested in the fall, tomatillos are the mainstay of “salsa verde,” or tangy green sauce, which is eaten as a mild “hot” sauce, or in recipes including enchilada verde (green enchiladas), chile verde (pork in green sauce) and to enliven rice, chicken or egg dishes. The ripe fruits are tangy sweet with fine, edible seeds and greenish-white flesh. They freeze or can well.



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Froth acts as a protective coating for spittlebugs and can be best removed with a jet of water from a garden hose.

Starts can be purchased from most local garden centers.

Question: What is the white foamy stuff on my plants? Will it cause any damage?

Answer: The sudsy white foam that appears on the stems of flowering perennials and annuals in the springtime is produced as a protective covering by the immobile nymphs of the spittlebug. They are well hidden by their foam as they suck up sap from garden plants.

The easiest way to identify spittlebugs is from the presence of the “spittle” they create. These spittle masses can be up to three-quarters of an inch in size. The nymphs are inside. They are soft-bodied, elongated, yellow to green in color and up to a quarter of an inch in length. The adults are a quarter of an inch long; they start out green and then turn brown or gray, although they are not usually seen.

Spittlebugs overwinter as eggs. The nymphs emerge in late April or early May and start feeding at the base of the plant but continue to move up, preferring tender foliage and blossom tissues. As adults, spittlebugs migrate to nearby grassy areas or places with broad-leaf weeds.

The females return in September and October and lay their eggs in plant debris or on the leaves and stems of your landscape plants. Thankfully, there are only one to two generations per year. Spittlebugs are related to cicadas, which may explain why spittlebugs are more of a problem in some years than others.

Don't be alarmed if you find this insect in your garden. Although they are sucking insects, in most cases, spittlebugs rarely damage garden plants. Spittlebug nymphs pierce the plant stems and suck plant juices. If large populations are present, feeding can cause leaves to become distorted and berries stunted.

In order to manage for spittlebugs, look for the easily recognized spittle foam and nymphs beginning in late April or early May in the crown area at the base of the plants. Check every two weeks, and as the plants grow, begin to inspect the underside of young leaves as well as the crown area. Spittlebugs will begin to be annoying at one spittle mass per square foot, a so-called aesthetic threshold.

No management of this insect is needed, since the unsightly effect does not last very long. Recommendations for control include:

- Remove weeds that are an attractive habitat for spittlebugs.
- Physically remove the spittlebugs by hand when it is practical.

■ The spittlebug froth acts as a protective coating for the insects. Because of that, it's difficult to control them with most methods, including insecticidal soaps or horticultural oil. Washing them off with a jet of water from the garden hose is the most effective method.

In conclusion, though unsightly, spittlebugs don't cause a lot of damage to plants, and remember that the adult will soon fly away.

Do you have a gardening question? Please email, call or visit the Douglas County Master Gardener Plant Clinic at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu, 541-672-4461 or 1134 S.E. Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.