

CILANTRO ~ LOVE IT OR HATE IT*Kathleen Szabo, MGV 1993***International Herb Association 2017 Herb of the Year****Coriander/Cilantro *Coriandrum sativum***

How many of you have grabbed a bunch of flat-leafed parsley at the grocery store only to realize when you got home that what you bought was, in fact, cilantro? These two herbs may look alike, but you would never have made that mistake if you had simply taken a whiff. There is no mistaking cilantro's unique sweet and pungent aroma. For some people, however, smelling cilantro is akin to smelling a skunk. It is one of the most polarizing herbs in the food world. Julia Child hated it. She once told Larry King that if she found some in a dish "I would pick it out and throw it on the floor." According to the *Oxford Companion to Food*, the word "coriander" is said to derive from the Greek word for bedbug and that "Europeans often have difficulty in overcoming their initial aversion to this smell." There is actually an "I Hate Cilantro" Facebook page with hundreds of fans. I am of Northern European ancestry and absolutely love the smell and taste of cilantro. It turns out that my genetics put me into the lucky 90%. The other 10% aren't crazy. They are just genetically challenged. They, unfortunately, possess a gene that makes them very sensitive to the aldehyde component of cilantro that makes it smell and taste soapy or buggy. However, unlike fixed genetic variances such as eye color, cilantro aversion can be changed over time. Some find that crushing the leaves before using it makes it more palatable. So, there is hope for all you cilantro-haters. Start your conversion by making pesto and move on from there by eating it with friends in pleasant places to form positive associations.

Cilantro refers to the leafy part of the plant. The seeds are referred to as coriander. It is a two-for-one plant. It has been grown for millennia. Ancient Egyptians used it, and the Bible refers to it. It is used extensively around the world. It is essential in salsas. In fact, America's love affair with cilantro started when salsa began to outrank ketchup as one of America's favorite condiments. That was the first widespread use of it in the U.S., and from there it began to be used in all kinds of cooking here. Consequently, production has exploded over the last 20-some years. Hybridizers are constantly working to produce plants that are leafier, slower to bolt, have more essential oils and are more disease resistant. 'Santo' is considered today's market standard. Other popular varieties are: 'Leisure,' 'Marino,' and 'Pot Cilantro 99057,' which is the first cilantro developed for pot culture.

Coriander seeds are an essential ingredient in Lebanese zaatar, North African harissa, Indian curries and many sweet pickle recipes. Since another term for cilantro is "Chinese parsley," you won't be surprised to know that it is popular in Chinese cuisines. Many Thai dishes use the roots, which have a more intense flavor than the leaves. It is such a versatile herb that everyone should grow it themselves, right?

Well, that can be a problem. The biggest challenge for us in the Midwest is that this plant grows really fast. As soon as the weather gets warm and the flowers start to form the leaves become scarce and bitter. On the plus side – the flowers do attract beneficial insects and are also edible. Many growers advise planting cilantro in its own bed, harvesting it in the cooler months and allowing it to self-seed. You will get new plants during the growing season and the following spring. Or you can make successive plantings every two weeks until the weather gets hot.



The plants can be harvested into the late fall, since leaves will take a light frost. Grow cilantro in full sun on well-drained soil with a pH of 6.2 to 6.8. Planting in light shade can extend the harvest when it gets warmer. Direct seeding is best, since plants have a taproot that resents transplanting. Thin to 12-18 inches apart.

Harvest when the leaf stems are 6-12 inches long. Take only about 1/3 of the leaves of each plant each time by cutting the stems near the bottom. Fertilize with fish emulsion or a well-balanced vegetable fertilizer after 4-5 harvests. Let some plants go to seed for use as coriander. If you are growing just for the seeds, you won't need to fertilize since this will delay flowering.

Harvest the seeds by clipping the brown seed heads and place them upside down in a paper bag. Hang in a dry place and, in a few days, the husks will dry and drop the seeds inside. Make sure you let a few seeds fall to the ground for new plants. Then pull the entire plant. This gives room for the new seedlings to grow.

Use insecticidal soap if aphids or white fly are a problem. To prevent fungus diseases, remove infected plants right away and be sure to clean up plant debris in the fall.

Use cilantro fresh because it loses most of its flavor when dried. Add chopped leaves at the last minute in cooked foods for maximum flavor. Like many other leafy herbs, you can store the leaves by freezing within ice cubes.



Photos: Bonnie Plants