

A Passionate Appetite for Cilantro

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Coriander, Cilantro

Coriandrum sativum

Cilantro is an annual, culinary and ornamental herb that grows up to 3 feet high and 1 foot wide. It can grow in full sun, or partial shade in hot regions, and requires average well-drained soil. Fresh cilantro is also called Chinese parsley. Fresh cilantro has an assertive culinary personality. Even in the smallest quantities, it makes its presence felt. No one asks, "What is that subtle flavor?" Leaves that emerge on its main stems are oval with toothed edges. Leaves growing on upper side branches are more lacy and delicate, resembling those of anise or dill.

As the season warms, a central flower stalk branches into beautiful, umbrella-shaped clusters of small, off-white, mauve or lavender flowers. Seeds are inside tiny round fruit that splits in half when dried. Fresh seeds have an unpleasant, musty, bedbug odor. Dried seeds have a pleasant, orange-spice aroma and flavor that increases with maturity.

It is one of the easiest herbs to grow from seed in climates where a March sowing is possible. It prefers relatively dry conditions, evenly distributed moisture and even temperatures. It cannot tolerate constant moisture. A sun-loving herb; locate cilantro in partial shade in hot-summer regions. To counter coriander's tendency to go to seed rapidly with the onset of long, warm days, growers have developed *Long Standing*, a slow to bolt cultivar. Harvests of fresh leaves are extended about 14 days. Whatever kind you grow, cut leaves frequently and stagger sowings to provide continued harvests.

It's a wonder that it was grown at all. Cilantro's distinctive taste has been compared to soap, it's scent to rubber or bedbugs (an all-too-common house guest in times past), from which it gets its name: *koris*, the Greek word for insect. Kinder souls liken it to honey, fresh oranges, a mixture of cumin, and caraway. Taste-buds are so individual; gourmets savor cilantro's "peppery aroma" and flavor that's "sharp and lemony with a hint of anise." Its wispy stems and delicate leaves give cilantro a dainty look, but this is one "hombre"-of an herb when it comes to cooling down the hot jalapeno, Serrano and poblano chile elements of Mexican food! Like a good lover, this herb brings out the best in what it's married to, such as tomatoes, lemons and garlic. Its proponents point out its nutritious nature. A quarter-cup of chopped fresh cilantro provides more vitamin A and C, iron, calcium and phosphorus than an equivalent quantity of green beans. It's high in potassium too.

Cooks and healers have used cilantro for 3,000 years. Wild cilantro was harvested in the Bronze age. In the first pages of *Exodus*, coriander is praised like "manna", and probably grew in the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. Its seeds heated up love lives in China. An exotic liquor laced with coriander was downed as an Aphrodisiac and an Elixir of Youth. A similar potion, used for the same non-culinary application, is extolled in *The Thousand and One Arabian Nights*. The herb does possess a certain "staying power"; seeds found buried in ancient Egyptian tombs were still able to germinate!

Cilantro is very *hip*—the culinary world embraces it as one of the "most eligible" flavor favorites. It has seduced its way into recipes for thick-crust pizzas, specialty sausages and pesto for pastas. Cilantro continues to be the macho-essence behind Southwest-inspired fare; chile-rich dishes, guacamole, fillings, uncooked salsas. The ground seeds make warm companions in breads, rolls and cookies. Fresh, the fruit is used to flavor gin. For the desirous cook—and guest—there seems to be not an end to its possibilities. *Not bad for a bedbug.*