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Let's salsa!

Tips on growing ingredients for a popular summertime treat

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By: **Tammy Swift**, INFORUM

Salsa is synonymous with summertime.

It makes the perfect light snack on a hot July day. And it helps use up the bounty of fresh tomatoes and peppers in our gardens.

With that in mind, Mara Trygstad of It's About Thyme greenhouse in Fargo recently organized a class on growing your own salsa garden.

Trygstad is a master gardener who specializes in herbs and heirloom vegetables. She and co-instructor Melissa Schmalenberger taught participants about different tomato varieties, shared growing tips and demonstrated favorite recipes.

The ideal salsa garden will provide just about everything but the chips: tomatoes, peppers, onions, garlic, cilantro and basil.

Read on to learn about some popular vegetable varieties for salsa, growing tips and recipes.

You say tomato ...

Meaty, flavorful tomatoes are central to a salsa's success.

Fortunately, almost everyone loves growing their own.

"If people have a garden, the tomato seems like the most popular thing to grow," Trygstad says.

Trygstad recommends mixing different varieties of tomatoes for the optimum combination of flavor and texture.

Salsa Mexicana



Salsas featured in Mara Trygstad and Melissa Schmalenberger's class on salsa gardens included an Avocado Salsa with Orange. Dave Wallis / The Forum

Avocado Salsa



Salsas featured in Mara Trygstad and Melissa Schmalenberger's class on salsa gardens included an Avocado Salsa with Orange. Dave Wallis / The Forum

Finely textured salsa



Salsas featured in Mara Trygstad and Melissa Schmalenberger's class on salsa gardens included a finely textured salsa. Dave Wallis / The Forum

Roma, for instance, hits a home run for flavor: It's meaty, sweet and pleasingly acidic. As a paste tomato, it also produces less juice and fewer seeds.

"It can really help thicken up your salsa," Trygstad says.

She advises mixing smaller paste tomatoes like Romas with bigger beefsteak tomatoes. That way, you don't have to skin and chop as many to fill up the salsa bowl.

A few other top recommendations of tomato varieties from Trygstad and Extension horticulturist Ron Smith:

- **Golden Mama**, a yellow sauce tomato with a mild, sweet flavor. Plants yield large crops of 4- to 5-ounce fruits.
- **La Roma** is a hybrid improvement on the Roma. It produces larger fruit (3 to 4 ounces). Also known for excellent flavor.
- **Celebrity** is a 1984 All-America Selection, meaning it shows high disease resistance and excellent productivity in different growing conditions. Its tomatoes are excellent for slicing or canning. Fruit size averages between 8 and 10 ounces.
- **Brandywine** is an heirloom variety from the 1880s. Fruits are reddish-pink and average a tubby 12 ounces. It produces rich-tasting fruit with light, creamy flesh.

Growing happy tomatoes

All tomatoes grow best in rich, loamy, well-drained soil, with at least six hours of sunlight per day.

They also need dependable doses of water and nutrients, Ron Smith, NDSU Extension horticulturist, writes in the Extension publication, "From the Garden to the Table: Salsa!"

Tomato plants require about 1 to 2 inches of water per week for best results, according to www.veggiegardener.com. A good way to gauge watering needs: stick a finger 1 inch into the soil near the plant. If the soil is dry, the plants need water. If it's moist, you can spare the watering can.

For best results, water tomatoes deeply and carefully. Avoid getting water on the leaves of the plant, as that can lead to powdery mildew and other diseases.

Mara Trygstad



Master gardener Mara Trygstad of It's About Thyme greenhouse conducts a class on gardening and demonstrates how to make different types of salsa. Dave Wallis / The Forum

Carter Ridl



Carter Ridl helps instructor Melissa Schmalenberger squeeze some lime juice into an avocado salsa she is making. Dave Wallis / The Forum

It's a good idea to give young tomato plants a nutritional boost when you first transplant them into the garden. Add a handful of granule organic fertilizer – preferably with a 10-52-10 nitrogen/phosphorous/potassium ratio – to the bottom of the planting hole. Then mix it into the soil well.

You can continue adding this starter-type fertilizer once a week for the next three weeks.

After that, try fertilizing the tomatoes weekly with a more balanced nutrient source (10-10-10), Smith says.

The secret to the heat

Peppers are another key ingredient in your salsa formula.

“You can tailor salsa with peppers,” Trygstad says. “Tomatoes are the base, but the peppers determine the heat.”

Like tomatoes, they need plenty of sunshine, water and balanced nutrition.

Most will mature in 65 to 75 days from transplanting, although the hotter varieties like habanero will need up to 100 days.

Heat is measured in pepper by Scoville Heat Units (SHU). To illustrate, a jalapeno packs 2,500-5,000 SHU while the fiery habanero can measure 300,000 SHU.

Bell peppers actually register a flat zero on the SHU scale. They're still a good addition, though, because they inject your salsa with sweetness and flavor, Trygstad says.

When preparing hot peppers, be sure to wear rubber gloves or to wash hands thoroughly in soap and water afterward before touching your face.

Many people like to include the seeds – which contain a lot of the “heat” – in their salsa recipes, but Trygstad warns that seeds from the pepper's membrane can sometimes make the condiment taste bitter.

Another trick from Trygstad: If you fear your salsa is too hot, add a spoonful or two of brown sugar to offset the burn.

Salsa (for canning)

7 quarts paste tomatoes, peeled, cored, chopped (see Note)

4 cups long green chili peppers, seeded and chopped

5 cups onion, chopped

½ cup jalapeno peppers, seeded and finely chopped

6 cloves garlic, minced

2 cups bottled lemon or lime juice

2 tablespoons salt

½ tablespoon red pepper

2 tablespoons ground cumin

3 tablespoons oregano leaves

2 tablespoons fresh cilantro

Wash hands thoroughly before handling food. Prepare peppers, wearing rubber gloves while handling them or washing hands thoroughly with soap and water before touching face.

Wash tomatoes. Dip in boiling water for 30 to 60 second or until skins split; then dip in cold water. Slip off skins and remove cores.

Combine all ingredients except cumin, oregano and cilantro in large pot and bring to a boil, stirring frequently. Reduce heat and boil 10 minutes. Add herbs and spices and simmer for another 20 minutes, stirring occasionally.

Ladle hot mixture into hot pint jars, leaving ½-inch headspace. Wipe jar rims. Cap with properly pretreated lids. Adjust lids and process in a boiling water canner for 20 minutes.

Note: Slicing tomatoes requires a much longer cooking time to achieve a desirable consistency.

Source: "From the Garden to the Table: Salsa!"

Avocado Salsa with Orange

4-6 jalapenos, washed

4-6 green onions, including tops

2 avocados

Juice of 1 lime

Juice of ½ orange

Juice of ½ lemon

1 clove garlic, minced

¼ cup fresh chopped cilantro

Salt to taste

Toast the jalapenos and onion in a skillet. After toasting, put all ingredients into a blender and blend well. A great complement to any meat dish. Do not can.

Salsa Mexicana

5-6 ripe roma tomatoes (or 3 medium-sized tomatoes), chopped

½ cup chopped onion

4-6 chopped serrano OR jalapeno chilies

2c cup chopped cilantro

1 teaspoon salt (or to taste)

Juice from ¼ fresh lime

Combine tomatoes, onion, chilies, cilantro, salt and juice in sauce dish. Do not can.

Source: Mara Trygstad

Can you safely can salsa?

Freezing salsa may be a safer alternative than canning salsa made from Grandma's home recipe, says Julie Garden-Robinson, NDSU Extension food and nutrition specialist.

The main food-borne illness associated with improperly canned food is botulism. The deadly bacteria that produces it, clostridium botulinum, thrives in an oxygen-free environment, such as a sealed jar or can.

Some tips for safe canning:

- Follow the formulation exactly and measure/weigh ingredients carefully. Use bottled lemon or lime juice or vinegar as indicated.
- The amount of spice can be safely decreased in canning recipes but should never be increased.
- To alter the “heat” in salsa, you can safely substitute one type of pepper for another, but keep the total amount of pepper added the same.
- Don’t thicken salsa with cornstarch before canning. If the salsa appears too thin, it can be heated and thickened with cornstarch, or some of the excess juice can be strained out after opening the jar.
- Before preparing salsa for canning, fill the water bath canner about half full of clean water. For hot-packed food, preheat the water to about 180 degrees. Use a rack in the canner.
- Start with clean jars, and heat them in a pan of hot water. Heat lids as recommended by the manufacturer.
- Fill jars, leaving a half-inch headspace. After filling jars, remove trapped air bubbles with a nonmetallic spatula, adjusting headspace as needed.
- Wipe the rim of each jar carefully and apply the lid and screw ring. Do not over-tighten ring. It should only be “finger tight” or the lids may not seal correctly.
- Place jars in canner using a jar lifter positioned below the screw band of the lid. Keep jars upright at all times.
- Add additional boiling water to bring the water level at least 1 inch above jar tops.
- Begin timing when water boils. Keep the canner covered during processing. The water should remain boiling at all times.
- When processing time is complete, carefully remove the jars from the canner with a jar lifter. Place the jars at least 1 inch apart on cooling racks or towels to cool at least 12 hours. Do not retighten screw rings. Do not expose jars to a cold surface or drafts, which could trigger breakage.
- Test seals the next day. A good seal will have a concave lid that doesn’t move when pressed. Remove the screw rings. Label sealed jars with contents and canning date.
- Unsealed jars can be safely reprocessed within 24 hours, or the jars of salsa may be refrigerated for fresh consumption. To reprocess, empty salsa into a pan, heat to boiling and ladle mixture into clean, hot jars. Use new lids and process for the full recommended time.

Online

- www.ag.ndsu.edu/pubs/yf/foods/fn584w.htm

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