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INTRODUCE YOURSELF TO

husk cherries

by Jennifer Burcke

I remember vividly the first time I tasted a husk cherry. It was more than a decade ago while shopping at the local farmers market with my young daughter.

One of the farmers had a small basket of papery lantern-shaped fruits on his table. I asked if they were tomatillos based on their appearance. He was happy to offer us a handful of husk cherries to taste while he told us all about these interesting fruits. One bite and we were hooked.

The flavor was so unique, so different from anything I had ever tasted. The golden fruit was sweet and earthy with a delightful tropical note. Their flavor nearly defies explanation, marrying the taste of a sweet, ripe cherry tomato with the citrus flavors of pineapple and mango.

The husk cherry isn't only delicious and beautiful. It's also simple to grow, prolific, and hits its harvest stride

just as the rest of our garden is wrapping up. The low growing vines support large green leaves and set small yellow flowers that develop into bright green lanterns. Each lantern protects the ripening fruit inside.

Husk Cherries are an heirloom, dating back to around 1840 when they first appeared in gardening literature. These vigorous fruits were once commonplace in gardens, but have become rare as society moved away from homegrown produce towards what was available in the grocery store. As husk cherries are difficult to transport long distances, they are ill-suited for large scale production for grocery stores and rarely seen outside of farmer's markets. Luckily, they are perfectly suited to growing in the backyard garden and can be grown in a variety of garden types from containers to raised beds.

Husk cherries are members of the *Solanaceae* family of plants along with other nightshades like tomatoes and eggplants. They also share the same genus and trademark lantern-shaped husk with the tomatillo. Husk cherries are susceptible to the same diseases as tomato and tomatillo plants, but tend to be hardier and more resistant to disease and pests in our garden. They like the same growing conditions as tomatoes, preferring good drainage and planting after the danger of frost has passed. Like tomatoes, they are a bit slow to germinate and tend to sprout roots along their stems. Planting them deeply in rich, well-drained soil will produce vigorous plants and higher yields. They require no staking and are self-pollinating. We begin harvesting our husk cherries in early August with the peak harvest occurring in mid to late September. Here in our New England garden, the husk cherry continues producing right up until the first hard frost.



When the husk cherry is ripe, the husk begins to change from a supple leaf green to a dry parchment-like appearance. The papery husks and ripe fruit drop to the ground, giving them reason to often be referred to as a "ground cherry." Fruits do sometimes drop before they are fully ripe, but they can be gathered and kept at room temperature in their husks. In a matter of days, they will ripen fully.



After harvest, husk cherries can be stored in a cool spot with ample air flow for a month or more before the fruit begins to suffer. When our garden provides a bounty of husk cherries, I often freeze them for later use. After being removed from the papery husk, the fruit can be washed, dried, and frozen on a sheet tray in a single layer. Once they are frozen solid, they can be transferred to a freezer bag for long term storage and used directly from the freezer. They can also be dried and enjoyed like raisins, eaten as a snack or added to baked goods.

Husk cherries contain high levels of pectin, making them perfect for using in sweet or savory jams and pie or tart fillings. They are as equally suited for pairing with the fall flavors of cinnamon and brown sugar as they are spicy peppers and cilantro to make homemade salsa. Their versatility and long storage life make it a staple in our kitchen every fall.

We love to eat husk cherries fresh from the garden. During late summer and early fall, our children are often found walking around the farm as they nibble on a handful of ripe husk cherries. Husk cherries are also just as likely to be snacked on as someone passes through the farmhouse kitchen.

When I do decide to cook and bake with husk cherries, I look to highlight their distinct flavor. I find that this recipe for savory jam does just that with a delicious balance of sweetness and acidity accented by rosemary harvested fresh from the fall garden. It's simple to make and delicious served with a cheese and charcuterie course or used as a spread on a grilled cheese sandwich. We've taken to adding a generous spoonful of it to the leftover Thanksgiving turkey sandwiches each year. The combination is delicious!

Jennifer spends her days living and writing at 1840 Farm with three generations of her family and their dogs, chickens, ducks, goats, and rabbit. She loves to create homegrown recipes in their farmhouse kitchen and dream up new handmade products for their [Etsy Shop](#). You can follow their daily adventures on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#) and enjoy a collection of homemade recipes on their [blog](#).

Savory Husk Cherry & Rosemary Jam

6 ounces husk cherries, papery husks removed
2 Tablespoons (24 grams) brown sugar
1 Tablespoon apple cider vinegar
4" sprig fresh rosemary, leaves removed and chopped finely
1 pinch sea salt

Instructions

1. Place a medium saucepan over medium heat. Add all of the ingredients and stir to combine. Bring the mixture to a simmer before reducing the heat to low. Using the back of a large spoon or a potato masher, gently crush the fruit to break the skins and release their juice. Continue to simmer gently uncovered, stirring occasionally, until the mixture is slightly thickened.
2. Remove the pan from the heat and allow it to cool to room temperature.
3. This savory jam can be stored in a Mason jar with a tight fitting lid in the refrigerator for several weeks. Serve it chilled or at room temperature.

