

Growing Coriander

Coriandrum sativum

The plant

Coriander is an increasingly popular green herb, used in Middle-Eastern and Asiatic cookery. As it is quite expensive to buy and doesn't keep well once cut, it makes sense to grow your own supply. Growing coriander isn't difficult but there are certain things to bear in mind for successful growing.

Varieties

There are a number of different cultivars of coriander, several of which are claimed to be slower to run to seed. In practice there appears to be little between them during mid summer, although they may display differences during spring or autumn sowings.

Cultivars recommended for leaf production include 'Leisure', 'Clantro', 'Slow-Bolt' and 'Confetti' (a cut leaved form, said to be less liable to bird damage). 'Lemon Scented' has a citrus-like scent to the leaves, and is best used for cold dishes.

In the United States and South America, coriander is sometimes referred to as 'Cilantro' or 'Culantro'. Somewhat confusingly, 'culantro' is also the common name given to an unrelated plant, *Eryngium foetidum*, whose leaves are used in Puerto Rican cooking.

Nigella sativa, also unrelated, is also known as Roman Coriander; and is grown for its aromatic seeds, which are most commonly encountered as a flavouring on naan breads, as well as being a popular spice in Punjabi cooking.

Sowing

The seed should be fresh, not more than two years old. It dislikes transplanting so is best sown directly into its permanent home. The crop likes warm, well-cultivated, but not overly fertile soil in full sun, so delay a spring sowing until April, when the temperatures should be sufficient to ensure quick germination. Crops sown in late summer will normally survive through the winter before flowering without protection and produce fresh leaves in the spring, unless you garden on a very cold or wet site, when they would benefit from being in a cold frame or polytunnel. In very sheltered areas you may be able to make sowings as late as mid September. These late sown plants will produce the maximum quantity of leaf.

In dry weather better results come from soaking the seedbed before sowing rather than repeated watering, which often encourages soil capping. Rake the soil before watering to prepare a fine tilth, and make the seed drills 1 cm/ .5in deep, in rows 20cm apart. Sow thinly and cover to the depth of the seed.

Germination will take between 7-20 days. For a plentiful supply of green herbs for cutting, repeat sowings every three weeks or so between April and late August. If you find you have a surplus, any extra can be chopped finely and frozen



for six months without loss of flavour. Some growers claim planting coriander amongst their carrots will repel aphids and carrot root fly by the smell of the crushed leaves, so you could scatter some cut foliage amongst other crops as a deterrent if you have a sudden glut.

Pests and diseases

Young coriander can be attractive to rabbits or sparrows, so you may need to provide protection such as netting. Slugs can also find plants tasty, and can be combated by a range of controls including hand picking, parasitic nematodes, encouraging biological controls such as ground beetles, using baits such as citrus halves or beer, or ferric phosphate based slug pellets.

Under cool damp conditions, coriander may suffer from the seedborne disease, bacterial leafspot (*Pseudomonas syringae* pv. *coriandricola*). This is visible as small brown leaf spots (2-5 mm in diameter), which may be surrounded by a water-soaked area and clearly visible on both sides of the leaf. It can be minimised by using clean seed, cleaning up plant debris, and watering at the base of plants where possible rather than overhead watering.

Growing for seed

Coriander will run to seed (or 'bolt') when the daylight hours become longer than night, and as the days lengthen this will become more and more rapid from sowing, so that a June-sown crop may well be producing flower-buds by July.

Removal of flower buds will postpone flowering but not prevent it, so keep cutting plants for foliage but don't be discouraged when they finally blossom. The white flowers are favourite food supplies for hoverflies, flower bugs and other beneficial insects, and are attractive in their own right.

If you wish to save your own seed from the plants, choose a dry day when most of the seed has turned brown. Shake the



plants gently to remove the seeds, or pull them up and hang them in a shed or garage to dry roots-up over a tray lined with newspaper to catch the seeds as they drop. If there are any particles of leaf collected with the seed these can easily be removed by winnowing – toss the seeds between two broad mouthed containers outside on a windy day, when the dry leaves will blow away in the breeze.

Home saved seed will not germinate immediately, as it has a period of dormancy, so don't use it for sowings in the same season as harvesting it.

If you continue to save your own seed for a number of years, the resulting plants will be better adapted to your individual growing conditions than the seed that you buy. You can try to select for low bolting characteristics by saving seed from the last plants to flower:

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For further information visit www.sowingnewseeds.org.uk
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