

Salsas get Boost with Homegrown Herbs



This summer, try spicing up the chips and salsa with homegrown cilantro and oregano. Cilantro, or coriander, is used in many salsas to add a unique, citrus/sage-like flavor. Sown from seed planted in spring, cilantro is slow to germinate. After emergence, thin plants to 4 to 6 inches apart in rows. Don't over-fertilize. Over-stimulation with nitrogen will reduce flavor.

Lower leaves are broad, with finely scalloped margins, while upper leaves are more threadlike. For best flavor, harvest only young leaves. Use cilantro leaves to flavor soups, beans, rice and stews in addition to salsas.

Cilantro is considered both an herb and a spice. The leaves are herbs and the seeds spice. Cilantro seeds have a citrus flavor, but no hint of sage. Grind seed or use it whole to flavor pickles, sausage, cheese, eggs, salad dressings and guacamole. Seeds are also good in breads and pastries.

Oregano is also popular. A perennial herb, oregano is best propagated from transplants established in late spring. It can also be established from root and stem cuttings taken in late spring to midsummer. Space plants 12 to 16 inches apart in rows. Greek oregano is one of the more popular culinary varieties. It has purple to brown square stems, broad leaves and pink to whitish spiked flowers. Harvest leaves before flowering.

Oregano's pungent, peppery flavor blends well with garlic and tomato sauce for both Mexican and Italian dishes. It enhances the flavor of egg and cheese dishes like quiche and omelets. It can be used to flavor meats, vegetables, beans and shellfish.

Oregano is often confused with its tender cousin, marjoram. Propagated from seed, germination can be slow. Plants are often established in a greenhouse and planted in late spring. As with oregano, harvest marjoram leaves before flowering. Use it to flavor meat, poultry, fish, vegetables, eggs, stews, soup and Mexican dishes.

This article adapted from Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service, USDA. Please contact Ken Churches at cdcalaveras@ucdavis.edu or (209) 754-6475 with your agricultural questions. To speak with a Certified Master Gardener: Calaveras (209) 754-2880, Tuolumne (209) 533-5696, Amador (209) 223-6837, El Dorado (530) 621-5543.