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One Herb – Two Names – Three Tasty Parts

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The International Herb Association's Herb of the Year award went to leafy green cilantro and its fruits or seeds known as coriander. Cilantro is a cool season annual that can be sown in the spring and again in late summer for a fall harvest. Unless you have been repeatedly cutting back the plants to harvest the leaves, your plants are probably blooming or forming seeds about now. Continuously harvesting the leaves will delay flower and seed formation by a few weeks depending on the temperature. Like many cool season annuals including lettuce and radishes, when the temperatures rise, plants bolt which means they bloom and set seed.

Cilantro and coriander have been used for culinary, medicinal and ceremonial purposes for over 3000 years. This plant grows wild over a large part of southern Europe and western Asia. It is hard to say in those parts where it originated and where it has naturalized. It was found in King Tut's tomb, and cultivated by the Greeks since between 1000 and 2000 B.C. Some Greek and Roman physicians made medicine from it but it was more useful for culinary and food preservation purposes. Eventually it was brought to North America and grown by the early settlers.

Sometimes cilantro is referred to as Chinese parsley as it is often used in the cuisines of Southeast Asia and China. It is also widely valued as a seasoning in Mexico and other Central American countries, East India, South America, Spain and Portugal. Fresh leaves are added to various dishes while the seeds can be used whole or ground. The root is also edible and incorporated into Thai recipes.

Either you really like this herb or you really don't. Many people love cilantro leaves for their sage-like, citrusy flavor and the seeds for their lemony-citrus smell and taste. Others think this plant smells like bedbugs. As it turns out, some people are just genetically predisposed to find the leaves have a rank or soapy smell while others really find the scent of the leaves and seeds have a refreshing lemony, lime or orange citrus flavor.

If you fall into the group that enjoys this aromatic herb, consider growing some in your garden or even in containers. Aside from giving a citrus kick to salsas, salads and other menu items, the leaves contain a fair amount of vitamins A, C and K. The seeds have some calcium and magnesium in them as well as various trace elements.

Plant seeds in mid-August for a fall harvest of leaves. Coriander seeds take a while to germinate so some advise soaking the seeds before planting but I have not found that necessary. It will take 2 weeks or so for the seeds to sprout. Plant them about one half inch deep and about 2 inches apart with about 8 to 10 inches between rows. They grow best in a well-drained soil with a pH of around 6.5. Plants can tolerate full sun to part shade.

The lower, lobed leaves can start to be harvested when they reach 4 to 5 inches tall. Plants either started from seed or transplanted into the garden last spring are probably flowering now. The pretty, lacy white to pinkish flowers are borne in small umbels and attractive to pollinators. After blooming, spherical seeds will start to form. If you intend to harvest the coriander seeds, leave them on the plant until the plants turn brownish and the seeds fully ripen. Any rank scent will be replaced by a pleasing citrus fragrance. Seeds need to be fully dry before storing so set in a single layer on cookie sheets or other suitable pan in a dry, well-ventilated spot for a few days to dry. Usually seeds are ground and added to dishes or pickling brines but sometimes they are toasted to bring out a nutty, citrusy flavor. Seeds that have not been dried properly will often have a bitter taste.

The seeds can even be added to potpourris to give them a lemony scent. The essential oil is extracted from them and used commercially to scent cosmetics and perfumes.

Cilantro and coriander makes for an interesting and flavorful garden herb. If you are not sure you would like it, pick some up at the grocery store and try it in one of the many on-line recipes. If it tastes good to you, look for some seeds to plant next month. Questions about growing cilantro or on other gardening topics can be directed to the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271 (www.ladybug.uconn.edu) or contact your local Cooperative Extension Center.