

Tomatillos

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Also known as husk tomato or ground cherry, the acidic tomatillo fruit is a staple of Meso-American cuisine. Botanically the tomatillo or *Physalis philadelphica* / *P. ixocarpa* is a member of the nightshade or Solanaceae family, which also includes tomatoes, peppers and eggplants. Like tomatoes, tomatillo fruits are high in the anti-oxidants beta carotene (2.2 mcg/100 mg) and lutein.

The entire plant contains several compounds with demonstrable cancer chemo preventive properties. Tomatillos contain ixocarpalactone A (IxoA), one of four withanolides which have been shown to be anti-proliferative against human colon cancer cells and to induce apoptosis or cell death in vitro. IxoA is found in the entire plant including the fresh fruits. This compound also demonstrates anti-bacterial activity against gram positive bacteria that cause respiratory infections. It is used in Guatemala as a folk remedy for this purpose. Like tomatillo, other species of *Physalis* also contain withanolides and have demonstrated medicinal properties in the laboratory. *P. peruviana* or Aquamanto is a Peruvian native with anti-cancer activity against human lung cancer cells in vitro. *P. angulata* contains a cytotoxic withanolide called withangulatin I, which has been shown to be anti-inflammatory in rats, induces apoptosis against oral cancer and is effective against the tropical disease Leishmaniasis. *P. minima* contains a potent analgesic and *P. viscosa* from South America has shown blood pressure reducing effects in vitro.

A close cousin of the tomatillo is the medicinal plant Ashwagandha, *Withania somnifera*. Ashwagandha is an important adaptogen herb in Ayurvedic medicine, and it too contains withanolides. Ashwagandha is used for stress, sleep, to increase vitality and to help with menopausal symptoms. For these



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reasons, it is likely that researchers have yet to discover all of the benefits of the humble tomatillo and its medicinally active withanolides.

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