

Your Coriander Substitute

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The true coriander can be difficult to grow from seeds under our local, tropical climate. The sawtooth coriander is an alternative that one can choose to grow at home for use as a coriander substitute. It can be attractive option for a homemaker who wants freshly picked herbs. The aroma and taste of a sawtooth coriander leaf are similar to, but much stronger than that of the true coriander.



Above: The sawtooth coriander.

The sawtooth coriander is also known by a number of other English names, which include culantro, Mexican coriander and long coriander. Although the plant does not possess any spines, it is prickly to touch due to its erect and stiff serrated leaf edges. Due to this characteristic, the plant may be called by yet another name - the spiny coriander. Its Chinese name, 刺芫荽 (ci yan sui), also has the same meaning. This herb is not a common sight in our local neighbourhood vegetable markets. It can only be purchased from the larger wet markets, such as the Tekka Market in Little India. The stallholder there may refer to it by its Malay name as “ketumbar Java”, which translates into Javanese coriander.

The exact origin of sawtooth coriander is not clearly known but it is native to Central and South America. Botanically known as *Eryngium foetidum*, the sawtooth coriander belongs to the same plant family as the true coriander, *Apiaceae*. Its specific name, “foetidum”, in Latin, means “bad odour”. Unpleasantly, some references describe the smell of a crushed sawtooth coriander leaf to that of a crushed bedbug! Hope this information does not put the reader off at this point!

Locally, the fresh leaves of the sawtooth coriander are picked when needed and cut into thin shreds, which are used both the raw or cooked forms as a food flavouring in soups, curries, stews, rice and fish dishes. Besides being used as a culinary herb, the sawtooth coriander also has medicinal uses and the more popular ones are given as follows. The roots of the sawtooth coriander are used to make decoction, which is believed to have sudorific (causes increased perspiration), diuretic (brings about increase urination), febrifuge (reduces fever) and stimulant (arouses physiological activity) properties. The leaves have been used as a laxative and also to treat colds and fever. The decoction of the whole plant is consumed to lower blood pressure. It is also said to have aphrodisiac properties.



Above: Sawtooth coriander bought from the market.
Notice the taproot the plants possess.

Both the true and sawtooth coriander possesses a prominent taproot and adopt a rosette growth pattern, where new leaves emerge from the center. As a plant, the sawtooth coriander’s appearance is vastly different from that of the true coriander. Unlike the leaves of the true coriander, the sawtooth coriander’s are lance-shaped, glossy and dark-green in colour. They have serrated edges, that resemble the toothed edge of a saw.

During the vegetative stage, the sawtooth coriander appears like a flat rosette, with its rather stiff, glossy leaves lying almost flat on the ground surface. When the plant is about to flower, it starts to grow taller and at the same time, it also sends up a terminal, sturdy flowering stalk, which branches extensively, carrying numerous inconspicuous, white flowers. The entire flower stalk is rather sharp and prickly due to the presence of numerous stiff, pointed bracts and calyxes. So tread around with care when one is walking alongside some flowering sawtooth coriander!

Getting Started

The sawtooth coriander is a fuss-free plant and is a good starting point for the novice herb gardener. Because the seeds of the sawtooth coriander are not readily available from commercial seed suppliers, plants raised in pots sold by local nurseries at a very affordable price is perhaps the next best alternative.



Left: The sawtooth coriander plant's tiny white flowers.



Right: The tiny seeds harvested from the sawtooth coriander plant.

Another means, although not always a successful one is to propagate the sawtooth coriander from material bought from the market. First, make sure that each individual plant has an intact taproot. The outer leaves are next stripped off for culinary purposes, leaving the younger leaves around the central growing point intact. Finally, the stripped plant is then planted into a pot of soil, making sure not to bury it too deeply. The point where the taproot joins the base of the rosette of leaves should be level with the soil surface. The plant is initially positioned in shade and moved to its final growing location when there are signs of it taking off. Keep the soil moist but not wet to reduce the likelihood of rot from setting in.

Right: Pots of young sawtooth coriander plants can be purchased from local nurseries.



The sawtooth coriander plant is well known for its weed-like status as it self-seeds readily and numerous seedlings and young plants can be seen growing around the flowering mother plant. A large number of plants can hence be obtained from a single plant and these can be given away, transplanted and grown elsewhere or even brought back to the kitchen for food uses! To reduce rampant self-seeding, flower stalks may be cut away as soon as they emerge, even before fruits are allowed to set. Care must be exercised as to how and where a cut flower stalk is discarded. Fresh seeds found inside the mature fruits still attached on the flower stalk germinate quite easily. Seedlings can appear randomly and become quite difficult to eradicate.

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The sawtooth coriander can grow very well under direct sun outdoors but are best cultivated in a partially shaded location. This makes it suitable for a sunny or bright windowsill or balcony in highrise apartments. When grown under shaded conditions, the sawtooth coriander will produce larger and more aromatic leaves. Reduced light conditions will also help to delay flowering, therefore lengthening the productive life of the plant. When it appears, the flower stalk may be cut away so as to encourage the growth of side shoots.

Not demanding in terms of soil conditions, the sawtooth coriander is adaptable to a wide range of soil conditions. It can even be seen growing in heavy clay soils. However, it prefers to grow in moist and well draining soil that is rich in organic matter.

Plants are tolerant to a certain degree of drought but should not be allowed to dry out. Feed plants with a fertiliser with a higher nitrogen ratio, according to the manufacturer's instructions, to promote leaf growth. The sawtooth coriander is seldom bothered by pests and diseases.



Left: A flowering sawtooth coriander plant. The stiff flower stalk can be prickly to touch.

Harvesting

Individual tender leaves can be harvested as and when they are needed. On average, one can expect to pick 1 to 2 leaves from one plant weekly to fortnightly up to 10 harvests before flowering occurs.

References

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