

Lyis: Pineapple Ground Cherry (*Physalis grisea*)

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Pineapple Ground Cherry (*Physalis grisea*)

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Origin & History

Native to eastern North America, *Physalis grisea* has been grown in cottage gardens for centuries. Sometimes called “husk tomato” or “strawberry ground cherry,” it was a familiar homestead fruit in the 19th century before falling out of common use. Today it is enjoying renewed interest for its unique tropical flavour and ease of cultivation, making it a heritage crop with modern appeal.

Frost-sensitive; grown as an annual in Zones 3–8. Prefers sandy loam, full sun, and warm conditions.

- **Hardiness Zone:** Annual in 3–8; short-lived perennial only in 9–11.
- **Frost Sensitivity:** Killed by frost; transplant outdoors after danger of frost has passed.
- **Harvest:** August–October; fruits drop in husks when ripe.
- **Self-Seeding:** Moderate—volunteers may appear from dropped fruit.

What Is Pineapple Ground Cherry?

A compact, sprawling nightshade producing golden berries wrapped in papery husks. The flavour is sweet and tropical, with hints of pineapple, mango, and vanilla. Fruits ripen August–October in Ontario and keep well in their husks.

Container Culture Options

A. 2–3 L Pot

- **Yield:** 20–40 fruits/season.
- **Care:** Regular moisture; monthly compost tea.

B. 7–10 L Pot

- **Yield:** 100–200 fruits/season.
- **Care:** 2–3 L water weekly; prune lightly to manage spread.

Key Features

- **Fruit:** Golden-yellow, 1.5–2 cm berries with tropical flavour.
- **Habit:** 45–75 cm tall, 60–120 cm wide, sprawling habit.
- **Self-fertile:** Reliable fruit set; bees improve yield.
- **Nutrient-rich:** High in vitamin C and carotenoids.

Option 3: Outdoor Planting

- **Site:** Full sun; loose soil with drainage.

- **Spacing:** 60–90 cm apart; mulch to keep fruits clean.
- **Yield:** 200–300+ fruits per vigorous plant.

2 Nutritional Benefits

Pineapple ground cherries are rich in vitamin C and carotenoids, particularly lutein and zeaxanthin, which support eye health and act as antioxidants. Their natural sugars and organic acids give them both refreshing flavour and high nutrient density.

- **Vitamin C:** Boosts immunity and improves iron absorption.
- **Carotenoids:** Protect vision and provide antioxidant benefits.
- **Storage in Husks:** Nutrients remain stable for weeks when fruits are kept dry in husks.

3 Pollination and Fruit Set

Self-fertile but yields increase with insect activity. Outdoors, bees and hoverflies are primary pollinators. Indoors, hand-pollinate with a soft brush or gently shake flowers in the morning.

4 Pest & Disease

- **Aphids:** Best controlled by co-planting with insectary flowers such as sweet alyssum, dill, or calendula, which attract lady beetles and hoverflies. Use soap/oil sprays only as a last resort, as they also harm beneficials.
- **Slugs:** Collect dropped fruit promptly; use traps if needed.
- **Mildew/Blight:** Ensure good airflow; avoid overhead watering.

5 Overwintering

Though usually grown as an annual, plants can be overwintered in containers:

- Bring potted plants indoors before frost.
- Place in a sunny window or under grow lights at 10–18 °C.
- Growth slows and fruiting may taper, but plants often survive and can provide early cuttings or seed the next spring.

6 Harvest, Storage & Uses

- **Ripe Fruits:** Drop to the ground in husks when ready.
- **Storage:** In husks at room temperature: 1–2 weeks; in a cool pantry: up to 4 weeks.
- **Fresh Eating:** Sweet snack or fruit salad addition.
- **Preserves:** Excellent for jams, chutneys, and compotes.
- **Baking:** Use in muffins, pies, or crisps.

7 Small Harvest Recipes

- **Compote:** Simmer 1 cup ground cherries with 2 tbsp maple syrup and splash of lemon juice.
- **Mini Tarts:** Bake pastry shells filled with mashed fruit.
- **Smoothies:** Blend with banana and yogurt for a tropical flavour.
- **Dried Fruit:** Dehydrate for chewy “golden raisins.”

Summary

Pineapple ground cherry (*Physalis grisea*) is an easy, rewarding plant for northern gardens and containers. Productive, self-fertile, and long-storing, it provides 50–300+ fruits per season with a bright tropical flavour and strong vitamin C and carotenoid content. Overwinter indoors if desired for a head start or cuttings.

Seed Saving & Propagation

1. Seed Saving:

- Collect ripe, fallen fruits.
- Ferment seeds in water for 24–48 h, rinse, dry in shade 3–5 days.
- Store dry at 4 °C for up to 4–5 years.

2. Growing from Seed (Surface

Sown):

- Start indoors 6–8 weeks before last frost.
- **Surface sow** seeds; press gently into moist mix but do not cover—light aids germination.
- Keep 20–25 °C and evenly moist.
- Germinates in 7–21 days. Transplant at 2–3 true leaves.