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Botanical Focus: A series of articles on the flora of the Cooks Creek Watershed

Ground Cherry (*Physalis*)

By David Oleksa

It's usually a big surprise to people to hear that many of our most favored garden vegetables and fruits are related to the deadly nightshade. Tomatoes, potatoes, eggplants and peppers all have this ominously named plant in their family tree. But today, we will be concentrating on a little-known member of the family – the ground cherry (*Physalis*).



Many of you have probably seen this plant if you've walked through fields in late September through early November. It generally grows close to the ground and rarely exceeds 12 to 18 inches in height. The leaves are fuzzy and resemble the leaves of the potato. During the summer it bears small interestingly pretty flowers, but they have a tendency to face downward and are often under the leaves so they are difficult to see. The fruit is a berry that grows inside a thin papery husk. As a matter of fact, the plant's Latin name, *Physalis*, means "bladder" and refers to this enclosed berry.

Most people are more familiar with the ground cherry's cousin, the Chinese lantern. Dried floral arrangements often make use of the brilliantly orange "lanterns" to add a stunning amount of color. The ground cherry's husk is similar in shape but only about 1/4 the size. Also, instead of being a brilliant orange, it is a drab tan. But inside that husk; what a treat! Each husk has one yellow/orange berry. The fruit must be this color to be eaten. Unripe fruit is not very tasty and may, in fact, be poisonous to some people.

When ripe though, the fruit can be eaten raw or enjoyed cooked in pies or jams. They also make a tasty salsa which reminds us of another of their cousins, the tomatillo. The fruits often drop from the plant on to the ground and can be stored for several weeks if kept in the husk. The husk, by the way, is not edible.

The plant is a native here in the U.S. with many different varieties existing in our varied geographies. Closely related varieties are also found in Europe. I've always been a big fan of linguistics and the names given to the ground cherry throughout the world simply roll off the tongue. The ancient Greeks called them *halikakabon* and *pheesalis* (bladder and swelling). The Italians called them *halicacabo volgare* (common bladder). Now, in Italy, they are more commonly referred to as *coralli* (coral) or *palloncini* (little balloons). The Germans call them *Judenkirschen* (Jews cherry) and *Schlutten* (ground cherry) The Aztec's *tomatl* serves as the root of our words tomato and tomatillo. In Hawaii, it is referred to as *Poha*.

So the next time you are wandering across some old or cultivated fields, sunny woods, waste ground, roadsides, or railroads, keep your eyes peeled for this wonderful plant.

Its desirability is such that many domesticated varieties have been developed for the garden. The one big downside for growing ground cherries though, is that they are perennials, and once established, they are difficult to get rid of. But after tasting this delicious fruit, who would want to get rid of it?