

Homegrown

Nicotiana tabacum (var. burley) is a warm-weather annual that enjoys heat, humidity, rich soil, and moderate moisture. A typical plant will grow to about five feet tall and two feet wide with 12-16 large, football-shaped leaves. Tubular, pink flowers appear in mid-August. Mature tobacco is ready for harvest by mid-September. Requires two months to air-cure before processing.

Planting

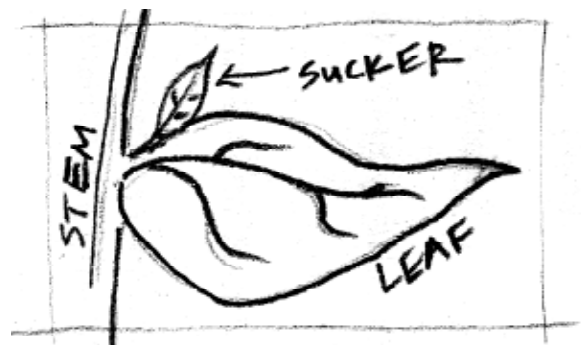
...in the ground: Choose a sunny spot if possible. In warm areas, partial shade or bright shade works fine though shaded plants may tend to flop. Amend the soil with lots of compost. Add a bit of slow-release (organic or otherwise) fertilizer. Add some wood-ash from your stove or fireplace if available. Plant 18-24 inches apart. If in a windy or shady location put a 6' stake or two in the ground at planting time to tie plant to later. Keep the plant watered well for the first few weeks until established, then water only during dry spells (when the soil is dry to a depth of 2").

...in a container: Use as large a container as possible. A 16" diameter planter or a five-gallon bucket is recommended. Ensure adequate drainage from the container. Use purchased potting soil or mix your own by combining 2 parts peat moss, 2 parts compost, and 1 part perlite or vermiculite. Mix a slow-release (organic or otherwise) fertilizer into the soil before planting. Water well when first planting, and keep moist for the first week, then water only when the soil is dry to a depth of 1". Then, water thoroughly – add until it drains out the bottom of the container. During very hot spells plants in containers can dry out quickly. Place container in a sunny or partially shady location outdoors or in a bright sunny area indoors. Indoors, rotate the container periodically to keep the plant growing straight. Outdoors, if the area is windy then put a 6' stake or two in the container at planting time to tie plant to later.

Growing

Feeding: Once the plant shows signs of active growth, fertilize every 2-4 weeks using a balanced (equal amounts N, P, and K) liquid fertilizer.

Suckering: Like tomato plants, tobacco plants develop suckers (shoots that grow where the leaves meet the main stem). Since suckers divert the plant's energy, they are frequently removed to encourage leaf growth. My advice is if you're planning to smoke it, sucker it. Suckers grow throughout the season. Pinch out or cut off suckers carefully to avoid damaging the leaves or the main stem.



Topping: In commercial production the flower stalk is cut off the top of the plant, again to encourage large leaf growth. This process is called 'topping'. It's your choice whether to top or not. I like the flowers and the thousands of tiny seeds they lead to, so I often leave them. Topping encourages suckers.

Staking: Especially in windy or shady sites plants will need to be staked once they reach 2' high or so. Tie the stem loosely to the stake, being careful not to snap the leaves. Check periodically to ensure the stake ties aren't interfering with the leaves or with the plant's growth.

Problems: While tobacco can be susceptible to many pests and diseases, I have found the plants to be largely trouble-free. In my Zone 6b, urban garden the main pests afflicting the tobacco are slugs and aphids. Various physical and chemical controls are effective against both. Consult your local agricultural extension office for more information about the conditions in your area.

Maturing: The plant will be 1-2 feet high a month after planting. By August it will be 3-4 feet tall and a flower stalk may appear. After a while the leaves will begin to yellow, starting from the bottom of the plant. About 4-5 weeks after flowering, the bottom two-thirds of the plant will be yellow and the top third will be turning pale yellow.

Harvesting: Remove mature (fully yellow and a bit dry) leaves from the lower part of the stem using scissors or a knife. Leave the upper leaves (which are still pale yellow-green) on the stem to mature for another week or two then cut them off. If the leaves are dirty they can be rinsed with water and left to dry in the sun before curing.

Making (cigarette) tobacco

Curing: Hang harvested leaves from their stems to dry and cure. Use needle and strong thread, or wire, to string the leaves together. String them through the thick part at the base of the stem. Space leaves closely but don't cram them together. Too far apart and they curl; too close together and they mold. Hang them in a warm, low-humidity place (if possible; wherever, if not possible) for 8 weeks or more. Eventually all of the green color will go out of the leaf and it will be crumbly and delicate. The longer the cure, the better.

Processing: Line a loaf pan (or similar) with wax paper or plastic, draping the lining over the sides of the pan. Fill a clean spray bottle with warm water. Flavorings can be added to the water as desired. Spray a cured leaf to moisten it slightly, making it pliable. Carefully remove the heavy stem from the center of the leaf and discard the stem. Place the leaf in the loaf pan, folding it as needed to fit the pan's shape. Moisten the next leaf, remove its stem, and place it on top of the first. Continue with remaining leaves. Fold the lining over the top of the tobacco 'loaf' and put some very heavy weight on top. The weight squeezes the liquid out of the leaves. Put the pan in a warm dry place. Drain the liquid from the pan periodically over a two-day period. Remove the tobacco from the pan and lining and place it in a warm dry place for a day or so. The tobacco should be more dry than wet but not bone-dry – sort of like a thick fruit roll-up in texture. Cut very thin slices off the shorter end of the 'loaf'. I use a utility knife and a metal cutting edge to make eighth-inch slices. Let the sliced tobacco dry for a day or so, then gently separate the pieces into loose strands with your fingers. Store in an airtight container.

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Please send photos of your plant to info@zoesheehan.com

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