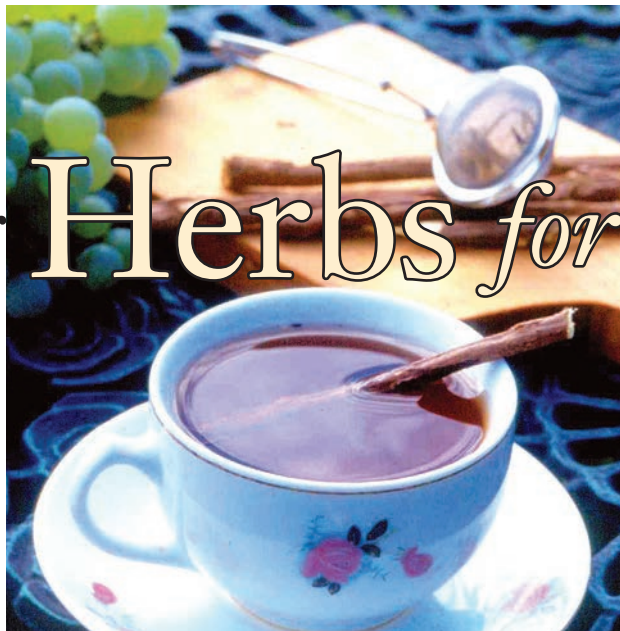


growing Herbs for Tea



MY GARDENS, which supply me with an abundance of food, are also the source of a remarkable variety of delicious beverages. Herbal teas are refreshing either hot or cold and can be prepared from freshly harvested leaves and flowers or dried for later use. And a few herbal teas are made from the dried roots or bark of plants.

According to the Tea Association of the USA, tea is defined as “the leaf and extracted liquor of the shrub *Camellia sinensis*.” An evergreen shrub originally native to eastern Asia, tea is now widely grown in mountainous regions that lie between the tropics. It thrives in USDA Hardiness Zones 8 to 10, AHS Heat Zones 10 to 7. Teas vary in how they are processed, which gives rise to such types as black,

Herbs that can be used as ingredients in teas are a delicious addition to the summer garden.

BY KRIS WETHERBEE

green, white, and oolong teas. Flavors also vary with the region in which the tea is grown and the time of year it is harvested.

While I haven't been able to grow *Camellia sinensis* in my Oregon garden, plenty of herbs and other common garden plants provide a ready source for herbal teas. In Europe, such beverages are often referred to as tisanes. A multitude of commercially prepared herbal teas are available at just about any grocery store these days. However, it's easy to grow your own tea garden, from which you can create your favorite herbal blends anytime you're in the mood. You may have plants growing in your garden right now that lend themselves well to herbal teas.

Many common culinary herbs such as rosemary, sage, lavender, thyme, and basil



Above: In addition to the leaves, the tufted blooms of beebalm (*Monarda didyma*)—which may be red, pink, purple, or white—are used to make a spicy, citrus-flavored tea. Top: The root of *Glycyrrhiza glabra* is used to brew a refreshing cup of licorice tea.

contribute wonderful flavors to blended herbal teas. Try spicy 'Siam Queen' basil for its clovelike flavor. Other aromatic favorites that you might already be growing for their ornamental appeal include lemon verbena, beebalm, and scented geraniums. Leaves and fruit from blueberries, strawberries, blackberries, and raspberries can be tossed into the teapot as well.

HERBAL TEA BLENDS

Growing your own herbal teas gives you the chance to experiment and come up with your own signature blend. These tasty herbal tea combinations listed below will help you get started on finding a favorite.

- Lemon verbena, chamomile
- Beebalm, blueberry leaf, 'Siam Queen' basil
- Pineapple sage, raspberry leaf, rose hips
- Chamomile, apple mint, cinnamon basil
- Lemon verbena, rosemary
- Anise hyssop, lemon balm, lemon thyme
- Orange mint, beebalm
- Licorice, orange mint, cinnamon basil
- Licorice, lemon balm
- Pineapple sage, lemon verbena

I always have an abundance of culinary herbs and berry plants at my disposal, and I count myself fortunate because blackberries, lemon balm, and rosehips grow wild on my property. But to ensure a ready supply of the best choices for making single ingredient herbal teas—or the primary ingredients in a blend—I recommend making room for the following tried-and-true plants in your garden.

ANISE HYSOP Anise hyssop (*Agastache foeniculum*, Zones 4–11, 12–5) is a member of the mint family (Lamiaceae), and despite its common name, it is not a true hyssop (*Hyssopus* spp.). The subtle licorice flavor of this North American native was long used in a tea by northern Plains Indians, who introduced this plant to settlers. Both leaves and flowers can be harvested for tea.



Anise hyssop, a member of the mint family, makes a full-flavored tea with notes of mint and licorice. It blends well with lemon-flavored herbs such as lemon verbena.

With its upright habit, neatly notched green leaves, and spikes of lilac-blue flowers, anise hyssop makes an attractive addition to the garden as well as a delicious tea. Reaching a height of three to four feet, this hardy perennial is well suited to the back of a mixed border where its flowers appear from summer to early fall, providing a haven for bees and other pollinators. Plants return each year and often self-sow, although it's not invasive. It grows well in full sun or part shade and prefers a rich, loamy soil. Plants are easily started from seed and will bloom their first year.

BEEBALM Also known as Oswego tea, beebalm (*Monarda didyma*, Zones 3–9, 9–1) is another mint family member na-

tive to North America. It was introduced to American colonists by Native Americans, who used it both as a beverage and medicine, and it became the tea of choice for colonists just before the Revolutionary War, when heavy taxes imposed by the British led to a boycott on imported tea.

Beebalm is a two- to four-foot-tall perennial with a bushy habit. It is one of my favorite garden plants, with its sensational summer flowers in shades of red, pink, lavender, and white. Each flower stem is topped with a whorl of flowers surrounded by showy bracts. It grows best in a fairly rich, moist soil that's slightly acidic, and is adaptable to full sun or part shade; gardeners in the South, however, should protect it from the hot summer sun with some



Above left: One of two species used for chamomile tea, *Matricaria recutita* is a self-sowing annual. Above right: The leaves of lemon verbena—a semi-evergreen woody shrub native to South America—are essential for providing a burst of citrus flavor in many herbal tea blends.

afternoon shade. Although both leaves and flowers can be used for tea, I get such enjoyment watching hummingbirds sip from the flowers that I tend to leave the colorful blooms and just harvest the leaves. Use them fresh—they make a lovely sun tea with mint and citrus flavors—or dry to create exciting blends.

CHAMOMILE Made from the flowers of two different plants, chamomile tea is highly esteemed for its relaxing, soothing effects and its subtle apple flavor. Native to Europe and western Asia, German chamomile (*Matricaria recutita*, Zones 0–0, 8–1) is a vigorous self-seeding (be forewarned) annual that grows two to three feet tall. Roman chamomile (*Chamaemelum nobile*, Zones 6–9, 9–6) is native to western Europe. It is a low-growing perennial groundcover that reaches a foot tall when flowering.

Both are easily started from seed and have miniature daisylike flowers with a fresh apple scent and feathery foliage. Although the Roman's fragrance is stronger, you'll get more flowers (and a greater har-

vest) from the German. Both need full sun and will tolerate most soil types as long as it's well drained. Harvest flowers anytime the white petals appear and use them fresh or dried. *A word of caution:* The pollen of both chamomiles has been known to cause allergic reactions, particularly for those who have an allergy to ragweed.

LEMON VERBENA When it comes to fresh citrus scents, lemon verbena (*Aloysia triphylla*, Zones 8–11, 12–8) is tops, and the invigorating lemony aroma holds just as true in the taste of the brewed leaves. Native to Chile and Argentina, lemon verbena is a semi-evergreen woody shrub that bears glossy, bright green, linear leaves. In my garden it grows to five feet and will sometimes overwinter; however, in frost-free areas, the shrub can easily grow 10 to 15 feet tall.

Site it in full sun in an area protected from damaging winds and in a rich, moist, well-drained soil. It also makes an excellent container plant, which offers the advantage of allowing you to grow it close at hand in summer and then bring it indoors for winter in regions where it isn't hardy.

The fresh leaves make a refreshing sun tea. For drying, harvest woody stems, hang them upside down, and strip the leaves after they have dried.

Sources

Companion Plants, Athens, OH. (740) 592-4643.

www.companionplants.com.

Goodwin Creek Gardens, Williams, OR. (541) 846-7357.

www.goodwincreekgardens.com.

Richters Herbs, Goodwood, Ontario, Canada. (905) 640-6677.

www.richters.com.

Resources

The Encyclopedia of Herbs by Arthur O. Tucker and Thomas Debaggio. Timber Press, Portland, OR, 2009.

Homegrown Tea: An Illustrated Guide to Planting, Harvesting, and Blending Teas and Tisanes by Cassie Liveridge. St. Martin's Griffin, New York, NY, 2014.

LICORICE European or cultivated licorice (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*, Zones 8–10, 10–3), native from the Mediterranean to southwest Asia, is one of the most widely consumed herbs in the world. A perennial member of the legume family (Fabaceae), it produces attractive, pealike, lavender flowers in late summer, but it's the roots that are harvested for the distinct flavor they lend to many candies and confections, as well as for a variety of medicinal uses. The roots make a superb tea by themselves or blended with other herbs. I have only used the roots in dried form.

Grow licorice in full sun and well-drained, rich, moist soil. Harvest roots from three- to four-year-old plants in late autumn or early winter after the tops have dried. It's best to cut them into sections to speed up drying time and reduce the chance of mold. Be sure to leave some of the root in the ground to allow sprouts to grow for the following year's crop.

ORANGE MINT A type of peppermint with garden origins, orange mint (*Mentha x piperita* var. *citrata*, Zones 5–11, 11–1) has a delightfully distinct citrus-mint fragrance and flavor. Though not as invasive as some of the more common mints, it will spread readily in rich, moist soil, supplying plenty of leaves to harvest for your fresh and dried use—and for your neighbors as well! Unless you live in a dry region with lean soil—or desire a naturalized groundcover—grow it in a container or use a barrier to prevent the rhizomes from spreading. It is adaptable to full sun (especially in cool regions) or part shade.

Growing to 24 inches tall, this mint's mahogany stems, purple-tinged leaves, and lavender summer flowers are quite striking as a backdrop for other plants.

PINEAPPLE SAGE Pineapple sage (*Salvia elegans*, Zones 8–11, 12–1) really does smell just like pineapple. What a magnificent way to bring the fruity treats of the tropics right into your own home! Native to Mexico and Guatemala, this herbaceous perennial or subshrub is equally as magnificent and stunning in the garden.

This herb thrives in a richer, more moist soil than its cousin common sage (*Salvia officinalis*). Where it is not hardy, plants can be purchased in spring and grown as annuals. Give it plenty of room—it grows three to



Above: Easy-to-grow orange mint can spread quickly like other mints, so it is often grown in containers. Top: Licorice has attractive pealike flowers, but it's the roots that are used for tea.

BREWING HERBAL TEAS

Herbal teas should be brewed gently to allow their flavor qualities to develop just right. Always determine the strength or weakness of your tea by taste and not by sight.

Whether you use fresh or dried leaves and/or flowers is mostly a matter of the time of year. For a few herbs, however, fresh wins out by a pinch for stronger flavor for making sun teas. These herbs include beebalm, lemon verbena, and pineapple sage. Whether you're using fresh or dried ingredients, here are some basic steps to help you brew the perfect hot or iced tea.

HOT TEA

1. Release the herb's oils by gently bruising the leaves with your fingers, or use a cocktail muddler. Put crushed herbs in tea balls, infusers, or tea bags. If brewing in a teapot, the herbs can be added loose.
2. For each cup of hot water, add one teaspoon of dried herbs or one tablespoon fresh herbs. Amounts can be adjusted to suit your taste.
3. Pour boiling water over the tea in the teapot or cup.
4. Let steep for four to six minutes.
5. Pour into cups (strain first if loose herbs were used) and add lemon or sweetener if desired.

SUN TEA

1. Loosely fill a large glass container half full with your choice of fresh herbs. If using dried herbs, add about two tablespoons of herbs per cup of water.
2. Fill container with water, cover with lid, and set in sun for four to eight hours.
3. Strain into a tall pitcher and pour in ice-filled glasses. Add a sprig of mint, pineapple sage, or nasturtium flowers for garnish. —K.W.

five feet tall and nearly as wide and produces loads of fragrant and flavorful gray-green leaves. In late summer, each stem is decorated with a loose panicle—up to eight inches long—of brilliant red tubular flowers. I love to use the fresh leaves and flowers for sun tea. Since the mild pineapple flavor is retained when dried, it makes an excellent hot tea, by itself or in blends.

GATHERING THE HARVEST

While tomatoes left on the vine a little too long will soon turn to mush, and a prime, full head of lettuce can quickly bolt, herbs, for the most part, are ready when you are. You can harvest a lot or a little, whatever suits your needs best.

Research indicates that herbs are at their peak of flavor early on a sunny morning when the dew has dried off their leaves. But, don't worry, the herbs will still be plenty flavorful if, heaven forbid, you are forced to pick them in the afternoon or the evening (or even on a cloudy day). My rule of thumb is to harvest them when it's convenient!

Herbs flourish with frequent harvests, which encourages the plants to grow

big and bushy. Allow new plantings to become established first; once they take hold you can harvest unsprayed herbs anytime in the spring, summer, or fall. Light harvests of individual leaves or short stems can be done throughout the



Harvest flowers of Roman chamomile on a dry day when the blooms are fully open.

growing season while heavier cuttings will usually give you two to three big harvests. When harvesting large amounts, cut the plants down to within a few inches of the ground, leaving several sets of leaves at the base.

Take advantage of the end-of-season harvest by drying your herbs for that warming winter tea. Herbs can be dried in a food dehydrator, in small bundles hung upside down, or on drying racks or screens. Slow, steady drying is best. Remember to keep the humidity low, allow plenty of air circulation, and keep them out of sunlight (the darker the better). Check herbs while drying—they are ready when the leaves are crisp and crush easily between your fingers.

HOW AND WHERE TO STORE

A glass jar with an airtight lid is an excellent container for storing your herbal teas. Strip leaves from the stem and put whole dried leaves, seeds, or flowers loosely in a container. Crushed leaves and flowers lose flavor and aroma more quickly than leaves and flowers left whole. Preserve that flavor by storing your herbal tea ingredients whole and wait to crush them until you're ready to make a pot of tea.

Store jars in a cool, dark location away from a heat source such as a stove or sunny window. Heat can weaken the flavor and reduce the quality of your herbal tea. A few days after you store your herbs, check jars for condensation that may show up underneath the lid or inside the jar. If moisture is apparent, the contents will need to be removed and dried a little longer before storing.

The versatility and benefits of having your own herbal tea garden can be enormous. Many produce marvelous flowers that are lovely ornamental additions to the garden and some attract hummingbirds and pollinators. When you feel parched from the heat of the blazing sun, refresh yourself with a tall, cool glass of freshly harvested herbal sun tea. And when winter has chilled you to the bone, warm up with a cup of hot herbal tea. You may discover as I did, that herbal tea is your beverage of choice all year round.

A frequent contributor to The American Gardener, Kris Wetherbee grows herbs for tea in her garden in Oakland, Oregon.