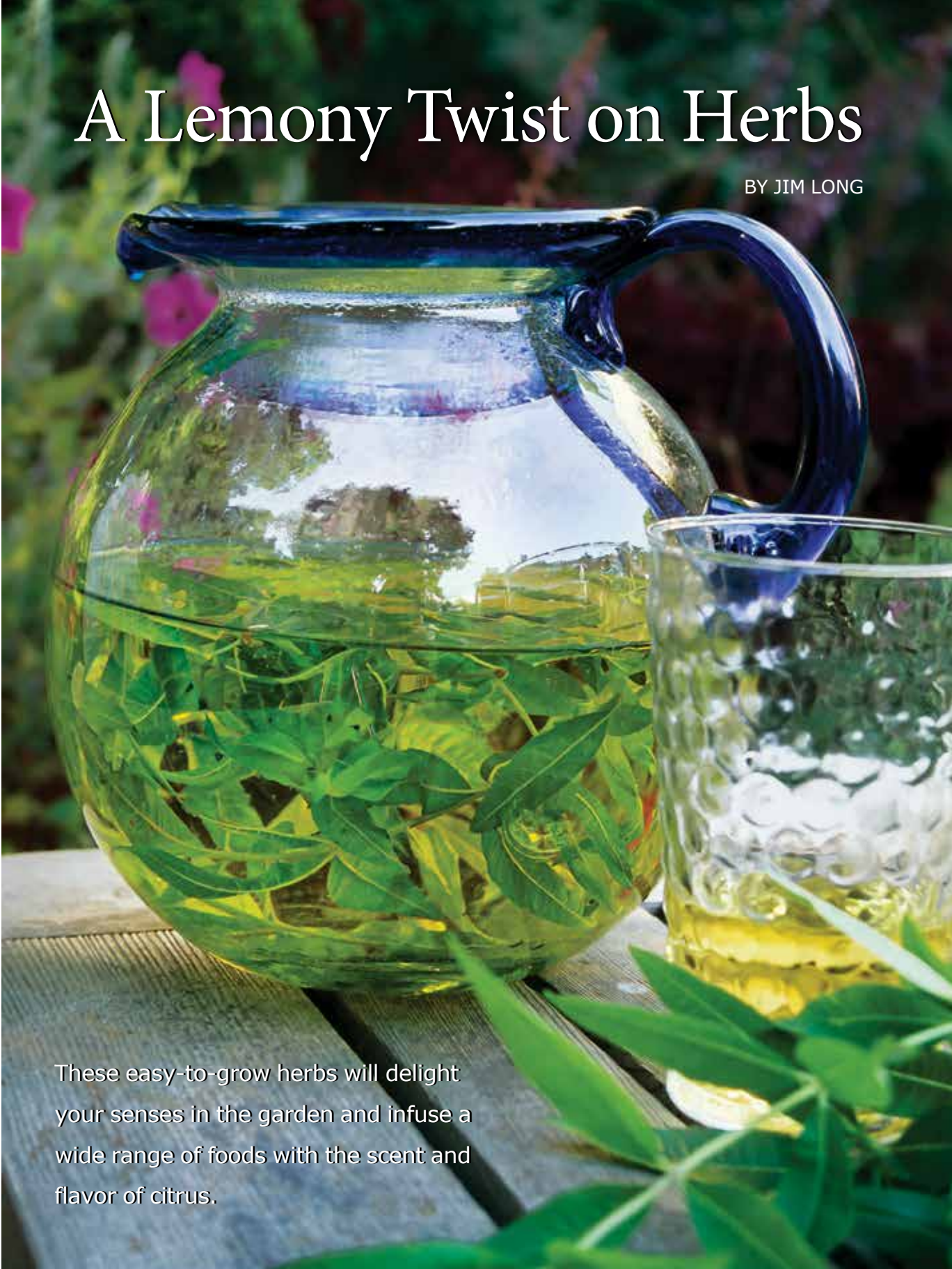


# A Lemony Twist on Herbs

BY JIM LONG

A photograph of a glass pitcher and a glass filled with lemon-infused herb tea. The pitcher is filled with a yellow liquid and green herbs. The glass is filled with the same liquid and has a textured pattern. Fresh green herbs are in the foreground. The background is a blurred garden with pink flowers.

These easy-to-grow herbs will delight your senses in the garden and infuse a wide range of foods with the scent and flavor of citrus.



Often I have been impressed with the restorative powers of both true citrus and the herbs that mimic those lemony flavors and fragrances. Years ago, on a trek through deep jungle in West Papua, New Guinea, I became overheated and exhausted, thinking I could barely take another step. My local guides paused at a wild citrus tree heavy with fruit. The smell alone seemed to revive me as I peeled one, and with the taste came an almost immediate invigorating boost. Now, when I encounter similar fragrances and tastes from my herb garden, I feel somehow connected to our hunter-gatherer past.

While several herbs share variations of this appealing scent, strangely enough, most are not related to each other. Sadly, I find citrus-flavored herbs are often overlooked by beginning gardeners when planning an herb garden. Some are intimidated by herbs in general, and so-called “exotics” worry them even more. They needn’t be discouraged—lemony herbs are as easy as any other herb to grow and use.

The following list is not by any means comprehensive, but it includes some of my favorites, with tips to grow and use them.

**Previous page:** A cool lemony tea is just one of the ways you can enjoy citrus-flavored herbs. **Right:** Lemongrass (*Cymbopogon citratus*) is a common ingredient in many Asian cuisines and its grasslike habit is quite ornamental.

## LEMON VERBENA

A native of South America, lemon verbena (*Aloysia triphylla*, formerly *Lippia triphylla*, USDA Hardiness Zones 8–11) was taken to Europe by early explorers, where it quickly found its way into cosmetics and candy. A stunningly fragrant, fast-growing herb, it will grow to about four feet tall in a single season. In warmer climates it will become a shrub or even a small tree, but in regions colder than Zone 8, it can be grown as an annual.

Lemon verbena is a delight on the patio in a planter at least 16 inches in diameter, where simply brushing against it or stroking the leaves releases its enchanting fragrance. If planting

in the ground, place it where you can brush against the plant occasionally. The leaves are used in teas, jellies, potpourris, candy, and even ice cream.

As seeds can be difficult to find, it is best to start this herb with a cutting or small potted plant. Somewhat woody-stemmed, cuttings may be slow to start. Most gardeners simply buy lemon verbena as a small plant in springtime. Give it full sun in the herb garden or patio pot. It thrives in hot weather; just be sure to water the plant weekly. You can bring the plant indoors and overwinter it inside. To do so, cut the plant back by at least half, provide a sunny location, then move it back outdoors after the danger of frost has past.







Lemon balm (*Melissa officinalis*) has been used to aid conditions like anxiety and insomnia, but also adds flavor to a wide range of recipes.

## LEMONGRASS

A tropical grass native to India, lemongrass (*Cymbopogon citratus*, Zones 10–12) can easily be grown as an annual anywhere. The parts used are the leaves and “bulbs,” which are actually the fattened base of the stalks. With a rich, lemon flavor, the stalks are used in seasoning for Thai, Indian, and other Asian cuisines. It contributes a fresh citrus flavor to cakes and curries. The dried leaves make an excellent tea. Medicinally it has been used for relieving bloating and as a sleep aid.

Although buying lemongrass plants from a nursery will yield harvestable “bulbs” much earlier, it’s also easy to grow from seed. Plant the seeds in a tray of seed-starting mix about a quarter-inch apart and half-an-inch deep. Cover the moist soil with a transparent cover to keep the soil evenly moist, and keep it under a grow light or by a sunny window that gives six to eight hours of light per day. When the seeds germinate in one to two weeks you can remove the cover. As soon as the

grass is three or four inches tall, transplant the little clumps to four- or six-inch pots. Begin moving plants outdoors to harden off after the last frost date. You can expect to begin harvesting bulbs in about three months, although you can harvest leaves for tea much earlier.

### Sources

**Baker Creek Seeds**, Mansfield, MO. [www.rareseeds.com](http://www.rareseeds.com).

■ Lemon balm ‘Limoncello’ lemon balm, lemongrass

**Glasshouse Works**, Stewart, OH. [www.glasshouseworks.com](http://www.glasshouseworks.com).

■ ‘All Gold’ lemon balm

**Mountain Valley Growers**, Yokuts Valley, CA. [www.mountainvalleygrowers.com](http://www.mountainvalleygrowers.com).

■ *Pelargonium* ‘Mabel Grey’, lemon thyme, lemon verbena

**Terroir Seeds**, Chino Valley, AZ. [www.UnderwoodGardens.com](http://www.UnderwoodGardens.com).

■ ‘Lime’ lemon balm

Alternatively, my favorite method is to buy a small bundle of fresh lemongrass from an Asian market and let it root in a glass of water. Because the lemongrass from the store has likely been treated to prevent sprouting, put a couple drops of dish soap in a glass of water and leave the lemongrass in that for 24 hours. Rinse and place the little clump in a vase of plain water on the windowsill, changing the water weekly. Roots start to appear in two to three weeks. Wait until the roots are at least two inches long, then transplant into pots and grow on in a sunny spot until ready for transplanting outdoors.

Lemongrass requires at least seven hours of sunlight daily. While it will grow in almost any garden soil (even large planters at least 18 inches in diameter), it requires regular weekly moisture. The plants will grow waist high by mid-summer and you can harvest the so-called bulbs repeatedly during the season. Simply pull the fattened, tender stalk away at the base, remove the outer husk, and it is ready to chop and add to the dish you are cooking. The leaves can also be dried for winter use and the bulbs can be refrigerated or frozen.

Lemongrass can be overwintered indoors. Cut the top back by half and keep in a moderately warm room with good sunlight. Reduce watering to about every 10 days, then move it back outdoors after the danger of frost.

*Note:* There are two varieties of lemongrass. This one used for cooking is sometimes called “East Indian lemongrass.” The other variety, citronella lemongrass (*Cymbopogon nardus*), is used in the manufacture of citronella repellents; it is unsuitable for cooking and may be invasive.

## LEMON BALM

Native to south-central Europe, lemon balm (*Melissa officinalis*, Zones 3–7) is a hardy perennial with many uses. Scientific studies have shown it to be helpful in reducing anxiety, aiding sleep, and even treating cold sores. Orchard growers historically planted lemon balm abundantly to attract bees to their orchards. In a wide range of recipes, lemon balm shines brightly. In cakes, cookies, and tea blends the citrus flavor is pronounced. I sometimes combine it

with lemongrass and lemon thyme for a more complex flavor.

Lemon balm has several cultivars, some more worthy of the garden than others. 'Lime' is a favorite of mine. 'All Gold' (also called 'Golden Lemonbalm') is another very desirable variety, with chartreuse green leaves that turn a delightful yellow in summer. The latter seldom flowers or sets seed, unlike other lemon balms, but offers a profoundly fresh lemon scent. Other popular varieties include 'Limoncello', 'Orange', and the variegated 'Aurea'. All are quite hardy but with less pronounced fragrance.

Seeds are available online and quite easy to start. Sow seeds in mid-winter in seed-starting mix about an eighth-inch deep and two inches apart. Keep the soil at about 70 degrees F in a sunny indoor spot or under a grow light. The seed will germinate within two weeks and seedlings can be transplanted into four-inch pots when they reach about two inches tall. While lemon balm is hardy once established, keep tender young plants indoors until after frost. For the more unusual varieties, I recommend you purchase a plant start or divide from a mature plant. Plant outside after danger of frost the first year. Lemon balm will thrive in average garden soil in the ground, or in a patio planter.

This herb does best with partial or filtered shade. The 'All Gold' variety, in particular, has the best color when not in full sun. Plants will form strong-rooted clumps. Cut lemon balm back by at least half three or four times during the growing season. If left untended it will go to seed and spread to other areas of the garden, although it is seldom invasive. Letting the plant bloom, however, ruins the flavor, causing it to taste "soapy." Lemon balm can also be grown indoors with direct sunlight or under grow lights.

### LEMON-SCENTED GERANIUM

With a pronounced fragrance and lovely ruffled pink flowers, lemon-scented geranium (*Pelargonium crispum*, Zones 9–11) has many culinary uses. Add flowers to salads, or candy them with sugar for desserts. Place leaves in the bottom of a cake pan before adding the batter to infuse citrus flavor as the cake bakes. Freeze the flowers in ice cubes to provide

a pleasant surprise in beverages when entertaining your guests.

The selection 'Mabel Grey' is the most strongly scented of the lemon geraniums and one of the more desirable ones. Its flowers and leaves are used dried in potpourri or fresh in bouquets, although caressing the leaves on occasion is a pleasantly rewarding reason for growing this plant.

Finding seed is challenging, so start with a potted plant or a rooted cutting. For cuttings, I recommend cutting a shoot five or six inches long, stripping all but the top two leaves, dipping the tip of the cutting in a rooting hormone, and placing it in a small pot with sterile potting soil. Cover the plant and soil

with plastic wrap or a glass jar at first and keep on the windowsill. You should have a new plant growing in three or four weeks. Grow it in moderate sunlight and don't overwater. Generally grown as an annual or wintered indoors, pelargoniums need at least four hours of sunlight daily. They require good drainage and will thrive in somewhat dry conditions.

### LEMON BASIL

For a sweet basil flavor with a refreshing undertone of citrus, try lemon basil (*Ocimum ×citriodorum*, Zones 9–11). 'Mrs. Burns' Lemon' basil is a favorite of mine. A related variety, lime basil (*Ocimum basilicum* 'Lime', Zones 9–11) is subtly distinct. This, too, has



Lemon-scented geraniums such as 'Mabel Grey' can be grown in a container and brought indoors in winter.





**Above:** Lemon thyme (*Thymus citriodorus*) thrives in drier soils and makes a good addition to rockeries or planters where it can spill over the edges. **Left:** For savory dishes, 'Mrs. Burns' Lemon' basil (*Ocimum basilicum*) infuses a sweet basil flavor with a strong hint of lemon.

the expected taste of basil, but with a pronounced element of lime.

The leaves of lemon basil are a delight in salads, used in place of lettuce on sandwiches, and in dishes that include shrimp. For a surprisingly delicious appetizer, lay several substantial branches of fresh lemon basil dipped in water on a medium-hot grill, lay fresh shrimp over those, grill for about two minutes, turn the shrimp once for another two minutes, and serve with more fresh basil sprigs as a garnish.

This tender perennial is often grown as an annual. It can be started from seed

indoors under a grow light or at a reliably sunny window about six weeks before the last frost. Sow seeds in a seed-starting mix and keep them at a temperature of about 80 degrees, with a transparent cover on the seed tray. Germination should occur in less than two weeks. When seedlings are about an inch tall they can be transplanted into four-inch pots and grown until ready to be planted outdoors.

Rich soil and regular weekly watering in full sunlight will give good results. Clip back flower sprigs throughout the season to keep the plant producing new leaves and to maintain the best flavor. Many gardeners start new plants repeatedly during the summer season for a continuous harvest.

### LEMON THYME

A fun and flavorful addition to a rock garden or along the edges of raised beds, lemon thyme (*Thymus citriodorus*, Zones 5–8) grows from four to 10 inches tall and is easy to harvest for culinary uses. I particularly enjoy the cultivars 'Lemon Frost', 'Pink Lemonade', and 'Grey Hill'.

The combined fragrance and flavor of thyme with lemon lends itself to seafood and chicken dishes. You can also combine it with lemongrass and lemon balm in cakes and cookies.

Lemon thyme requires full sun, is reliably evergreen, and thrives in drier soil. You may find seeds, but thyme is much easier to start with a small plant, or by propagating new plants from rooted cuttings. Thyme is easily grown in containers on the patio, often combined with other small-growing herbs such as lemon basil. Give it a space where it can trail over the edge of the planter, or along the edges of raised beds in the garden. Once the flowers have wilted, prune the plant to encourage more growth. Lemon thyme can also be grown indoors under grow lights.

Lemony herbs are a welcome addition in both the garden and the kitchen. Nearly all attract bees and butterflies. The flavor and fragrances add sparkle to many foods, and the citrus elements speak to our senses in delightful ways. ■

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