

Fragrant dreams with a cup o' herbal tea

Which herbs can you grow in your garden that makes soothing teas?



By Katharine Fletcher

January. With the garden blanketed with snow it's a good time to curl up with a mug of herbal tea and dream, then plan what you'll grow next summer.

Wait a moment! Why not plant herbs that you can cut and/or dry so you can make your very own soothing teas?

With most of us wanting to purchase locally grown foods these days, perhaps we can all grow something in containers, windowsills or in our gardens, that we can turn into tea.

Here are some ideas for you to try. Some plants can grow indoors so you can make your own tea year-round. Some will do better if grown outside. Regardless, it's fun and easy to offer house guests tea that you've not only brewed yourself – but whose herbs you've grown.

Herb basics

Herbs like sun. Some, like mint, can make a go of it with an hour or so of sunshine per day. However, most herbs should be planted in full sun.

When gathering fresh herbs to make tea, bruise the leaves so that the oils are more readily released. Boil water, heat the teapot, heat the mugs, then pour boiling water on a generous handful. Steep for five minutes, pour using strainer, and enjoy.

Gather and dry, then store: Gather leaves when they're vigorous and before the plant flowers (or, keep pruning the plant so it gets bushier) so that the energy is in the leaves, not flowers and developing seeds.

Tip: why not mix tastes? Try mint with raspberry leaves; try different types of mint together... have fun!

Anise hyssop: Outdoor or indoor

My hands-down favourite herb tea that I grow in the garden every year. Grows about a metre high, tall spikes of lavender-coloured blossoms that pollinators (particularly bumble bees) like. Square stem; soft, toothed bright green leaves. Pick and dry leaves then use a generous handful for your pot of tea.

Lavender: Outdoors

A little snippet of lavender gives a fragrant, flowery tea. Too much? Mix and match it with some other herbs: perhaps mint? Lavender is not necessarily hardy here: try different varieties and protect/ mulch in winter. Square stem; soft, toothed bright green leaves. Pick and dry leaves then use a generous handful for your pot of tea.

Lemon balm: Outdoor or indoor

Brush against this plant and you smell the pungency of lemon. For tea? Leaves are deeply wrinkled and when crushed are very fragrant: a delicious, soothing beverage.

Mint: Outdoor or indoor

Gardeners have a love-hate relationship with this incredibly vigorous plant so let's not beat around the bush: Mint is invasive. Tip: Plant it in a container in the garden.

Not all mints are created equal: Peppermint is my all-purpose favourite for tea as it has an especially fresh zing to it. However, spearmint is good, too. A friend of mine swears by chocolate mint: After sampling her tea, that's what I'm now going to plant in my garden.

Chamomile

A small plant reminiscent of a tiny Shasta daisy. with a bright gold centre, it is the flowers that are used to make the tea. Collect flowers when they've just opened, dry them, and use as you would the leaves. Chamomile is very pretty as a low-flowering showy flower but beware: like mint, it spreads easily, though by seed not by its root system.

Hibiscus

When visiting a friend in Mexico about 18 years ago, I saw her pick hibiscus flowers from the bushes blossoming outside her artist's studio. She poured boiling

water on them, let them steep, cooled the liquid and served with a slice of lime and ice. Delicious. Also good hot, but as a summertime cold drink, it's very refreshing. Three years ago, I was in Egypt and noticed that one of the most popular drinks was hot hibiscus tea. Try mixing it with mint. I include hibiscus here because even if you don't have a herb garden, you can have your own, homemade and indoor-homegrown herbal teas with plants you grow inside, or on your patio or balcony.

Disclaimer

Naturally, I have to start off with a disclaimer – and a few cautions. First, as you probably would guess, although I can happily advise you about the properties these teas are supposed to have, I won't advocate any medicinal properties. (However, for fun and also to perhaps indicate what the tea might do for you, I will give you some “tea tales.”)

Cautions

Second: the cautions. You must properly and safely identify any plants you are going to eat. Not all plants are beneficial; some are poisonous, so please be careful. Finally, please do not spray plants with an insecticide/pesticide (or anything else) and then eat it. The plants I listed are known, easy-to-identify herbs which you should be able to purchase at local nurseries.

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