

Growing Your Own Herbal Teas

By Lynn Heagney

July 1, 2011



Part One: Tea from the Garden

If you've ever stopped to examine the cost of herbal teas at the supermarket and thought to yourself, "For these prices, I should just start making my own teas!" Guess what? You can!

Growing an herbal tea garden is fun and rewarding: selecting the site for your garden, deciding which herbs you'd like to grow, choosing a design, then planting, harvesting, and using the herbs you've grown in delicious teas. When you're finished, not only will you have a wonderful source for all of your favorite teas, but you'll also have a place that attracts butterflies, bees, and hummingbirds.

Your first major decision is deciding where you'd like to locate your garden. Be sure to pick a site that has lots of sun, at least 4-6 hours per day because most herbs like sunny locations. Also, pick an area that drains well. Only mint likes "wet feet;" the rest prefer drier areas. If your only option is a damp area, you might consider planting your herbs in a raised bed, or in containers. It's also nice if you can find a site that's relatively close to your house so you can have fast and easy access to fresh herbs.

Now you're ready to choose which herbs you'd like to include in your garden. You can decide to establish a site exclusively for herbs used only in teas, or you can combine those with culinary herbs. You can also mix both types of herbs with a variety of flowers. If you'd like see how these combinations might work, plan a visit to the Discovery Gardens in Mount Vernon, where the Herb Garden and Cottage Garden provide inspiring examples of these strategies.

If you design your tea bed against a fence, hedge, or wall, be sure to place the taller plants in the back and the shorter ones in front to ensure adequate sunlight and a good view of your herbs. If you decide on a circular garden, which is visible from all sides, place the tallest herbs in the center and work outward toward the shortest. Make sure that you allow room for growth, about 12-18 inches between annuals and 18-24 inches between perennials. Remember to label them; otherwise you may forget just what's coming up in your garden!



Mint



Rugosa Rose



Lemon Balm

Photos by Frank Varga / Skagit Valley Herald

A final caution: If you're going to include mint in your garden, make sure to contain it either in a pot or a bottomless bucket on a solid surface (a dish or patio floor.) Mints are extremely invasive, and they will take over anyplace they're planted.

TEN HERBS FOR TEAS	
<u>Herb:</u>	<u>Parts Used</u>
anise hyssop (<i>Agastache foeniculum</i>)	leaves
basil (<i>Ocimum basilicum</i>)	leaves
bergamot (<i>Monarda didyma</i>)	leaves/flowers
(also known as "beebalm & monarda")	
chamomile (<i>Anthemis nobilis</i>)	flowers
lavendar (<i>Lavandula vera</i>)	flowers
lemon balm (<i>Melissa officinalis</i>)	leaves
marjoram (<i>Origanum marjorana</i>)	leaves
(some varieties also known as "oregano")	
mint (<i>Mentha</i>)	leaves
rosemary (<i>Rosmarinus officinalis</i>)	leaves
yarrow (<i>Achillea millefolium</i>)	leaves/flowers

Because the key to growing good herbs is good soil, you'll want to test your soil before planting. A good garden bed is well-drained, crumbly, and enriched with organic matter /fertilizer. The best and easiest soil amendment is compost, either your own, or a good organic compost from a reputable garden center. Mix the compost with your existing soil to a depth of at least one foot. Avoid preparing your soil on a wet day when the soil is sticky and will compact.

A final consideration is testing your soil pH, or level of acidity. You can purchase a basic soil test kit or send a soil sample to a testing service (see Resources.) The ideal soil pH level is 7.0 to 7.5, which is neutral to slightly alkaline. If your soil is too acidic, you can add a light dusting of ground limestone; if it's too alkaline, you can add organic matter, like peat moss, or iron sulfate at a rate of 3 pounds per 100 square feet.

Now you've chosen the site for your garden, decided on a design, checked and amended the soil, and planted your herbal teas. The final step to growing a lush garden is applying mulch to protect the soil surface, retain moisture, and modify the temperature of the soil. Mulches are any material such as bark chips, leaves, straw, or pine needles. This will also help suppress weed growth, a bonus for any gardener.

Next week in "Tea from the Garden – Part Two," we'll review methods for harvesting, drying and storing your herbs, along with a serving of tea recipes.

RESOURCES

- *Growing Your Own Herbal Tea Garden*, by Annie Mueller:
www.organicauthority.com/organic-gardening/growing-an-herbal-tea-garden.html
- *The Herbal Tea Garden*, by Marietta Marshall Marcin, Garden Way Publishing, Pownal, Vermont: 1994.
- Soil Testing Instructions and List of Labs, WSU King County Extension:
<http://king.wsu.edu/foodandfarms/documents/SoilTesting.pdf>



Master Gardener Lynn Heagney smells a sprig of mint growing in the Herb Garden, in June at the Washington State University Discovery Gardens west of Mount Vernon. Heagney grows herbs for making tea. **Photo by Frank Varga / Skagit Valley Herald**