

Growing an Herbal Tea Garden

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Teas if you please

Growing an herbal tea garden is fun and rewarding. It involves 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!

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.

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.



Chamomile tea is one of the most commonly grown teas in home gardens. / *Submitted photo in Skagit Valley Herald.*

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.

In the spring, after all danger of frost is past, and the soil is warm and has begun to dry, you can sow your seeds. Sow them at a depth of twice their diameter.

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.

Harvest, then enjoy the fruits of your brewing

Your herbs are growing nicely. You've watered, trimmed and carefully monitored them for any insect or disease problems. Now you can begin harvesting. Choose a dry day, and pick the herbs in the morning after the dew has dried. The essential oil concentration is said to be the highest before the heat of the sun draws the oils out of the plant.

Depending on which herb you're harvesting, you'll use various parts: leaves, flowers, petals, hips, seeds, or roots. To harvest clean leaves, be sure to use scissors or shears rather than your fingers. You may want to rinse your herbs with a light spray; then let them dry in the sun or use a salad spinner to remove excess water. Avoid picking herbs that have been exposed to herbicides, insecticides, or car exhaust.

Small amounts of many herbs can be harvested any time during the growing season. Clipping leaves from the stem will encourage bushier growth. Chives and parsley, however, should be cut from the base. In addition, do not harvest large quantities of woody herbs such as sage or thyme in the late summer or fall because that encourages new growth that does not have time to harden off before winter.



Upper Left: Growing tea in a home garden can result in unusual treats, such as a lavender tea latte.

Upper Right: Growing different kinds of mint can yield great results for your tea selection. / *Submitted photos in the Skagit Valley Herald.*

Drying or Freezing Your Herbs

To store your herbs, you can either dry or freeze them. Dry them quickly to ensure maximum flavor, using a gentle, even heat. One option is to use a food dehydrator. Place sprigs in a single layer on each tray; when dry, strip off the leaves and store in an airtight container. A microwave lined with paper towels can also be used. Set the timer for a minute or less, and keep a vigilant watch to prevent scorching or burning. Repeat until dry. Leave the door open a minute or two between each batch, allowing moisture to escape. You can also use a slow oven, from 100 to 125 degrees F. Keep the door slightly ajar; allowing moisture to escape. Check the progress often.

You can also hang your herbs in a dry place. To keep them dust-free, place bunches in paper bags with slits or holes. Never hang herbs in a garage or basement, since they tend to collect and absorb bad odors and molds. Whatever method you choose, keep your herb bunches separate and labeled. Once dried, they can be hard to tell apart.

Store dried herbs in airtight containers. If possible, store them whole to retain more scent and flavor. You can use glass jars or zip-lock bags. Paper bags will not protect herbs from dampness or pests. Containers should be clean, dry, and labeled with variety and date. Keep the containers away from moisture, sunlight and extreme heat.

You can also freeze herbs in zip-lock bags, preserving the delicate flavors lost in drying. When you're ready to use them, take out a few sprigs and mince with a sharp knife. Another option is to place petals, leaves, or sprigs in an ice cube tray, cover with water, and freeze. Once frozen, remove cubes from the tray, store in plastic bags, and use for iced teas and flavored punches.

Now that you've enjoyed the many rewards of growing your own herbal tea garden, you can now experiment with endless combinations. By growing your own herbs, you've also added a wonderful refuge in your yard for butterflies, birds, bees, and your friends and family. And when you're drinking one of your herbal teas one cold winter night, you can pat yourself on the back and think, "I grew it myself!"

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>) (also known as "beebalm & monarda")	leaves/flowers
chamomile (<i>Anthemis nobilis</i>)	flowers
lavender (<i>Lavandula vera</i>)	flowers
lemon balm (<i>Melissa officinalis</i>)	leaves
marjoram (<i>Origanum marjorana</i>) (some varieties known as "oregano")	leaves
mint (<i>Mentha</i>)	leaves
rosemary (<i>Rosmarinus officinalis</i>)	leaves
yarrow (<i>Achillea millefolium</i>)	leaves/flowers

Resources:

- "Growing Your Own Herbal Tea Garden" Mueller, Anne.
www.organicauthority.com/organic-gardening/growing-an-herbal-tea-garden.html
- "The Herbal Tea Garden" Marchin, Marietta Marshall. Garden Way Publishing, Pownal, Vermont: 1994
- "Analytical Laboratories and Consultants Serving Agriculture in the Pacific Northwest" Washington State University: <http://analyticalabs.puyallup.wsu.edu/>
- "Cornell Book of Herbs" Mackin, Jenny. Cornell Cooperative Extension, Ithaca, New York. 1993