

Lemon Herbs

Summer is a terrific time for lemon-flavored beverages and dishes. The wide variety of lemon-scented and lemon-flavored herbs makes it possible to add a hint of lemon to almost anything you prepare in the kitchen. Lemon herbs are a great way to bring a delicious lemon flavor and fragrance into your cooking without the acidity or mess of lemons. Here are a few of the most popular lemon herbs including harvesting tips, cultivation requirements, and culinary uses.

Lemon Verbena (*Aloysia citriodora* or *A. triphylla*)

Lemon verbena has the most intense, true lemon scent of all the lemon herbs. Its long, pointed, light green leaves have a bright, lemony fragrance. Lemon verbena is a tender perennial, often treated as an annual, that grows to about three feet high. The leaves can be harvested any time during the growing season, but will have the best flavor and fragrance if cut just before the plant flowers. Don't cut more than one-third of the plant at one time. If leaves are large, hold the central vein of the leaf at the base where it meets the stem with one hand and gently strip the leaf off with the other hand, leaving the vein behind. Fresh leaves of lemon verbena are tough, so be sure to chop them very finely or remove them from foods before serving. Lemon verbena is best when added at the end of cooking, as its flavor diminishes as it cooks.



Lemon verbena photograph courtesy of Gernot Katzer's Spice Pages

Although commonly used for tea, lemon verbena is great in other beverages or as a garnish for cold drinks. Its flavor can enhance fruit salad, pudding, homemade ice cream, sorbet, custard, tarts, cakes, cookies, and other desserts. In main dishes, it combines well with ginger, garlic, green onions, cilantro, and mint. Or brush the leaves with egg white and sprinkle with sugar to make candied leaves. They make a great cake decoration along with candied flowers and will keep for months.



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Lemon Balm (*Melissa officinalis*)

Lemon balm is a hardy perennial that grows to about three feet high. It is a member of the mint family and spreads almost as quickly. The heart-shaped, golden-green leaves have scalloped edges and give off a pleasant lemon scent when crushed. For optimum flavor and fragrance, pick the leaves just before the flowers open. Young leaves are better; older leaves can be tough and bitter. After blooming, cut the plant back by at least one-half to prevent it from seeding.

Lemon balm is often used on its own to make a soothing and relaxing hot tea, but it can also be combined with lemon verbena to make iced tea. Fresh leaves are often added to salads, sauces, stuffings, or mayonnaise, or combined with other herbs in fish, mushroom, chicken, or cheese dishes. Lemon balm is good in fruit salad and in many vegetable dishes.

Lemon Basil (*Ocimum basilicum*—several cultivars including ‘Citriodorum’)

Lemon basil's small, slender leaves have a subtle basil flavor and a pronounced lemon fragrance. It is a low-growing annual that is easy to grow from seed and deserves a place in your garden along with sweet basil.

Lemon basil loves sun and heat, so if you buy plants, don't rush to put them into the garden—wait until temperatures stay above 50°F. Pick leaves when they are young, cutting right above a leaf pair, and pinch the plant often to promote bushiness. As soon as flower buds form, cut off the top of each stem at the leaf junction just below the buds. The plant will die sooner if allowed to set seed.

To keep basil from discoloring, tear the leaves rather than chopping with a knife. Lemon basil, like other varieties of basil, loses flavor as it cooks, so add it at the end of cooking. Use lemon basil in soups, stews, vegetable dishes, salads, or steam a few sprigs with fish as it cooks. The leaves are also used in berry desserts, drinks, pesto, and vinegars.

Lemongrass (*Cymbopogon flexuosus* and *C. citratus*)

Lemongrass is a frost-tender perennial grass that is popularly used to add a lemon flavor to Asian cuisine. In the garden, lemongrass is a beautiful ornamental grass that forms a rounded clump of foliage up to four feet tall in one growing season. Its arching, light green leaves are about three feet long and one inch wide and emit a lemony scent. Unlike other lemon herbs, lemongrass can sometimes be found in well-stocked supermarkets or Asian markets. Nurseries often sell small plants. Plant it in a sunny spot in the garden, and harvest small sections from the outside base of the clump throughout the summer.



Photo courtesy Missouri Botanical PlantFinder.

To use in cooking, whether purchased or grown, remove the tough outer leaves, then chop the tender white base of the stalk. Add lemongrass to Asian dishes, vegetable stir-fries, rice and noodle dishes, marinades, curries, salads, and soups.

Lemon Thyme (*Thymus x citriodorus* – several cultivars)



Photo courtesy Missouri Botanical
PlantFinder.

Both citrus and savory, lemon thyme is a popular lemon herb. It is a low-growing evergreen shrub with tiny fragrant leaves that is an attractive addition to an herb garden, rock garden, or border. Lemon thyme also makes a great container plant or groundcover, and its flowers attract bees. Golden lemon thyme, a variegated type with leaves edged in yellow, has a lighter lemon scent than the solid green variety. Lemon thyme is best used fresh rather than dried. Harvest leaves throughout the growing season, and cut the plant back by about one-third after it blooms to encourage new growth.

Lemon thyme is often added to poultry, seafood, and vegetable dishes. It's also terrific in marinades, stews, soups, sauces, and stuffings. Fresh sprigs may be used as a garnish. Chop lemon thyme just before using and add it at the end of cooking, as it quickly loses flavor and can discolor.

Cultivation of Lemon Herbs

The table below summarizes the cultivation requirements of the lemon herbs mentioned in this article. For more information about growing lemon herbs, see the list of references at the end of the article or contact your local extension office.

	Hardiness	Exposure	Soil	Watering	Maintenance	Propagating	Pests
Lemon verbena	Tender perennial—treat as annual or grow indoors in winter	Full sun	Well-drained, alkaline soil	Little to moderate water	Prune drooping and woody branches	Stem cuttings in July and August	Spider mites, whiteflies
Lemon balm	Hardy perennial	Partial shade to full sun; may wilt in extreme heat	Moist, fertile soil, but will grow anywhere	Little to moderate water	Cut flower buds to prevent reseeding	Spreads rapidly from seed; layering; cuttings	Spider mites, aphids
Lemon basil	Annual	Full sun; protect from wind, scorching, and frost	Average, well-drained soil	Moderate watering; avoid overwatering seedlings	Cut flower buds to prolong life of plant	Sow in place, avoid transplanting	Aphids, slugs
Lemongrass	Hardy only to zone 10–11, treat as annual elsewhere	Full sun, tolerates light shade	Best in rich soil with good drainage	Fairly drought tolerant, but better if watered	Feed monthly with half-strength fish emulsion during growing season	Grow from seed or small plants; overwinter indoors	Spider mites on indoor plants

These are just a few of the most common lemon herbs. Others include lemon-scented geraniums (*Pelargonium*), lemon savory (*Satureja biflora*), lemon mint (*Mentha x piperita* var. *citrata*), and lemon monarda (*Monarda citriodora*). Whether you grow just a few culinary herbs or have a huge herb garden, make room for lemon herbs. Even if you enjoy only their fragrance and appearance, they will make a wonderful addition to your garden.

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