

Herbal Tea Gardening

Herbs have been around for thousands of years and have been used in a variety of ways. Most people are familiar with their culinary uses, but herbs have also been used medicinally as well. Hence - the beginning of herbal teas.

Although today most people drink herbal teas for their flavor, many of these have wonderful health benefits as well. Chamomile and lavender teas have a soothing effect, while basil and rosemary teas work as stimulants. Many aid in digestion (chamomile, sage), help stimulate the immune system (echinacea, sage), work as mild laxatives (roses, dandelion root), and have good vitamin content (rose petals, dandelion, parsley). Besides the taste and health benefits, tea herbs look wonderful in the garden as well. Many herbs have beautiful flowers and interesting foliage.

The first step in creating your herbal tea garden is selecting the proper site. Most herbs need full sun and good drainage. Herbs do not grow well in wet soils, so most sites in southern Wisconsin need to be amended due to our heavy clay soils. The addition of gypsum and organic matter (compost) is a good way to alleviate this problem.

The size of your garden is a personal choice. The more varieties of plants you desire, the bigger the garden. The garden should be separated from any area where the use of chemicals is desired. Do not plant in areas next to lawns that you weed & feed.

The care, or lack of care in this case, of your gardens is important if you want a successful tea garden. Because most herbs produce flavorless foliage if watered or fertilized too much, this should be avoided. The more stress your plants endure, the more flavor they obtain. There are plants, like roses and hibiscus, that are exceptions to this rule and should be grown in another area. Keeping weeds in check is the only care your garden will need.

used consist of mints, raspberry, lemon balm, sages, anise hyssop, bee balm, catnip, fennel, basil, thymes, rosemary, lemon grass, lemon verbena, horehound, dandelions and stevia (a natural sweetener). The flowers of these plants should be pinched off if you want a stronger flavor in the leaves. Plants where the flowers are used include hibiscus, lavender, chamomile, jasmine, roses (petals & hips), catnip and elderberry to list a few. Stamens and pistils should be removed if you want your tea pollen free.

Proper harvesting techniques are also important. As a rule of thumb, leafy herbs grown for their oils should be harvested before they flower. Harvest in the morning after the dew has dried and before the sun gets too hot. The hot sun evaporates the essential oil in the leaves. Do not wash plants after harvesting, dry plants are less likely to grow mold or spoil. If you're harvesting flowers, let the blooms open fully. Pick them while they are lush and fragrant, with the calyx, the leaf-like structure at the flower base, still attached. Remove stamens and pistils.

Although herbs can be used fresh, most make the best tea when their oils are dried and more concentrated. Slow drying is the best method to preserve these precious oils. Never dry herbs in direct sunlight. They should be bundled and hung upside down to draw the oils into the leaves. A warm, dark and dry place is best. Do not allow

temperature to reach above 85° F or the oils will evaporate also. It may take a week or two, so be patient. It's worth the wait.

Once your herbs are fully dried, they need to be stored in an airtight container. Glass jars work great. Store in a cool, dark place. Once you find the combinations of herbs you like, you can pre-mix your own personal blends. All that's left now is to steep your herbs in nearly boiling water & serve.

An herbal tea garden - A garden that looks good, tastes good, is easy to maintain and is good for you. What more could a health conscious gardener ask for. Drink & enjoy! Happy gardening!