

Homegrown Teas from Your Garden

by Brandy Cowley-Gilbert

Gardening in North Florida and tea making are a natural combination, as many of the plants in our gardens lend themselves well to tea making. The iced tea that we southerners drink on hot summer days is made from a species of camellia, *Camellia sinensis*. This plant grows like a weed here, and making homemade green tea is easy, while black tea is made by a fermenting process. To learn more check out the IFAS guide "Tea Growing in The Florida Home Landscape" on the web at: <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/hs308>.

The herb garden is a natural place to begin your tea making adventure. Mints grow well here and can supply a steady supply of leaves for a daily tea break. Mint can be the base of many blended herbal teas. Making blended teas is fun and only limited by your imagination. Some other North Florida herbs to use include; **lemon balm**, *Melissa officinalis*, which will survive neglect, but enjoys an occasional watering. Lemon balm tea is soothing, just add a little honey and enjoy. **Lemon verbena**, *Aloysia citriodora*, is an underutilized herb that is a mainstay of tea making. It is winter hardy in a sheltered spot, and likes dry poor soils. Lemon Verbena leaves make a delicious tea by themselves or when combined with other ingredients. **Lemongrass**, *Cymbopogon citrates*, flourishes in our humid climate. It is tender to frosts, but grows well in a protected area or container. Many commercial herbal teas use this plant as an ingredient; it's wonderful combined with blackberry and strawberry leaves, rose hips and honey. **Holy basil**, *Ocimum tenuiflorum*, has a spicy clove flavor. **Sage**, *Salvia officinalis*, goes well with the lemon herbs, ginger, dried orange and lemon peel. Try **lemon thyme**, *Thymus × citriodorus*, for its lemony woody flavor, which mixes with fennel and strawberry leaves. **Lavender**, *Lavandula vera*, *L. spica* is used for its cool, sweetly aromatic, exotic flavor. For good cultural information on growing herbs, download IFAS "Herbs in the Florida Garden" <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/vh020>

Many fruiting plants have leaves and flowers that are great additions to tea blends. Extra fruit from the orchard can also be dried to make tea. Strawberry, blueberry, apple, and pear are just a few to brew with. The possibilities are endless, kiwi and persimmon tea, anyone? Don't throw away your citrus peels; trim into slivers and dry. Fresh fruit can also be used in teas; one of my favorites is sweet kumquats sliced in half and floated in a jasmine black tea blend. **Citrus** and **elderberry** blossoms impart a sweet honey-like flavor to the blend, use fresh or dry for use later. **Blackberry** leaves

are also used dry or fresh; they are tangy and cool with a refreshing aftertaste. **Strawberry** leaves have a cooling strawberry flavor. Blackberry, strawberry, and elderberry leaves are wonderful combined with dried fruit and sweetened with honey.

Some of the most interesting teas are made from **olive**, *Olea europaea*, and **bay**, *Laurus nobilis*, and yes, both of these are easily grown our area. Olive leaf tea has been consumed in the Mediterranean for over 5000 years. Recent studies have shown that olive leaf extract lowers blood glucose and benefit people with diabetes. Olive tea is simple to make; leaves are washed, air dried, and steeped in boiled water for a few minutes until liquid turns a beautiful golden tan color. Sweeten with honey and serve hot or cold. Only the Mediterranean bay is used to make tea as some of our native bays are poisonous. Bay imparts a bitter flavor, that when used sparingly in blends, sets off the sweeter herbs, creating more complex flavor notes in the brew.

Homemade teas from your garden are easy to make, and you'll soon find yourself enjoying the process as much as the brew. There are many more great books and articles on the web to get you started. A great source for learning about harvesting and drying herbs is located on the Vegetable Growers website at <http://www.vegetablegardener.com/item/2701/how-to-dry-herbs>.

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