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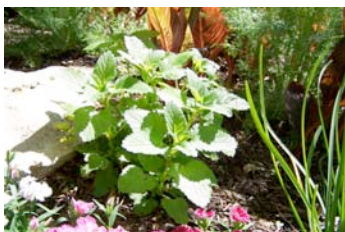
In the Garden

Tea Time in Texas

by Diana Hyland (plant photos by William Hyland)

As the summer heat approaches, it's a good time to think about a Texas-style tea party, one that comes straight from the garden. You need but a small patch of land or a couple of patio pots to get started. The work is easy, but leave your white gloves at home as you're gonna get dirty.

Creating fresh herbal tea is one of the best ways to enjoy your garden, especially if you're sipping tea while lounging amongst fragrant greenery. In Austin, herbs are easy to grow and take little care. Most need modest amounts of water. Once established, keep plants lightly mulched and trimmed for fuller foliage.



Try growing lemon balm, lemon verbena, bee balm, chamomile, thyme and any kind of mint. Lemon balm and mint are in the same family and require similar care. Both grow in sun to partial shade, though lemon balm prefers a break from the summer heat. Lemon balm grows in clumps and spreads easily, but it is usually controllable. You only need one plant as you can simply divide and separate when you need more. After harvesting, lemon balm is especially tasty when infused with fresh ginger and honey. The result is a delightful calming effect.

Mint requires more water. It is also more invasive and almost impossible to control, so always plant mint in pots or a contained planter. Try all varieties. Peppermint, spearmint and apple mint are common varieties available at many local garden centers. Each has a unique flavor and characteristic scent. Peppermint has long been used as a digestive aid, soothing to the stomach, effective for easing nausea and a natural breath freshener. It's also a light energizer. Spearmint has similar properties, but with a slightly milder palette. Apple mint has a fresh, fruity essence and is perfect for cold drinks.

To make a pot of tea, simply snip a fresh section of leaves, stems and all, and lightly crush them before placing inside a ceramic pot or pitcher. Pour hot water over the leaves and let steep, usually 10 to 30 minutes. Try using 2 tablespoons of fresh herbs to one cup of water, then adjust to your preference. Once strained, your tea can be served hot, chilled or blended with fruit juice. Tea should be stored in the refrigerator and lasts up to 4 days. Never make just one cup, as tea this good must be shared.



Making herbal tea is easy, affordable and caffeine free, not to mention, delicious. Using fresh, garden-grown herbs lets you blend flavors to suit your taste, and it sure beats Lipton. Plus, have you checked the price of tea these days? Many of the new herbal varieties go for as much as \$10 or \$12 a package. Also consider that many herbs are perennials, so you can have fresh tea year after year using just one plant.



For many, the secret ingredient to fresh tea is a plant called stevia, the 'sweet herb.' Stevia is sweeter than sugar and has no calories, so it's great for dieters and diabetics. You can buy little packets of stevia at Whole Foods or Central Market, but why bother? The plant is easy to grow throughout the spring, summer and fall. Stevia has a very intense sweetness, so it's best to start with a few leaves blended with other herbs. The art of making tea is highly subjective, so quantities and timing are based on your individual taste. And that's the only taste that matters.



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