



How to enjoy citrus flavours without having to grow fruit

7 ways to grow your own citrus flavourings



Barbara Segall explains how to enjoy zesty pickings through the growing of herbs

There is nothing I like more than ice and a slice of lemon in most cooling summer drinks. The zesty taste of citrus is also pleasing in salads, in the same way, the essential oils in the foliage and skins of citrus fruits are known to have an uplifting effect.

Oranges and lemons have flavoured, sharpened and sweetened food throughout history, yet in our climate they aren't the easiest of plants to grow. Although I do have one or two lemon plants in the greenhouse, I haven't yet harvested a single fruit, so the next best alternative is the foliage of many herbs that have citrus notes in their 'flavour DNA'. I enjoy these citrus 'imposters' in many ways. In the garden on a hot day or evening, the citrus aroma is more noticeable, particularly if you squeeze and sniff the foliage to release the fragrance, which is clean and refreshing and enhanced in an enclosed space with hedges or walls surrounding.

I grow my lemon-scented herbs in containers or in the raised beds among the vegetables, not in a dedicated lemon-

scented area. Maybe if I had a larger garden I would think about grouping them in a whimsically lemon slice-shaped bed with a seat in the middle so that I can enjoy their lemon appeal at close quarters. To introduce a little more colour to the planting I would use pot marigold (*Calendula officinalis* 'Lemon Queen') and *Tagetes tenuifolia* 'Lemon Gem' for their colour rather than aroma. Bergamot (*Monarda citriodora*) is another zesty plant known for its lemon aroma.

Lemon balm (*Melissa officinalis*)

This is great for attracting pollinators and has many foliage variants. Whether the leaves are lemon, lime or orange, or are variegated or golden, they are all very easy to grow. In fact, they are so vigorous and will always want more space than I can offer in my small garden. They seed prolifically and can take over a little, but they are useful as they offer great low-maintenance clumps of colour in borders. One person's self-seeding herb, is another's opportunity to giveaway young herb plants for free.



Pick and pick again to enjoy the many culinary possibilities with this lovely easy to grow herb

The green and the variegated balms provide good colour and shape, and their aroma is how I imagine smell-surround might be. I enjoy picking a few sprigs to perfume water for a simple hand wash and to crush as I walk around the garden. Cutting back after flowering helps to control self-seeding and also encourages growth of fresh new leaves. The foliage is useful dried and fresh, iced or hot, to make a refreshing tea. The leaves are tasty in salads and will add a strong zesty taste if used to flavour stuffings for e.g. poultry. The flowers also add a citrus note to salads. *Melissa officinalis* 'Mandarina' can be used similarly but offers a more orange taste to food. *M. officinalis* 'All Gold' is just as lemony but its foliage is buttery yellow.

Out of the kitchen, lemon balm leaves offer relaxing aromas in hot baths. They can also be used to make delicately scented handwash bowls for use after eating artichokes or lobster.

Thymus sp

There is always space for thyme in any shape or form in my herb garden and there are so many that offer distinctive citrus notes in their foliage as well as in their flowers. *Thymus x citriodorus* 'Silver Queen' with silvery white rims is attractive in the garden or in containers. 'Golden King' has similar lemon flavour but its leaves have a golden variegation. It also grows well in containers and looks good in a gravelled patio area. I am also trying out a thyme with a lime flavour and pretty mauve flowers.



Thymus x citriodorus 'Silver Queen'



Orange thyme (*Thymus fragrantissimus*)

They all do well in full sun and mine are in containers, rather than in a border, as I enjoy seeing the mass of flowers at height rather than at ground level. I cut them back after flowering, except for the creeping thymes. Orange thyme (*Thymus fragrantissimus*) with its small white flowers offers a slightly different fruity taste to salads. Thyme is one of the basic ingredients of the herb bundle *bouquet garni* and the lemon-scented form will add a fruity taste to stuffings. All of these thymes can be used in cooked food as well as freshly cut into salads. They go well with fish and poultry and I also use them in fruit salads.

Lemon verbena (*Aloysia citriodora*)

This is probably top of my citrus herbs list. It invites you to pinch its leaves and hold them to your nostrils to get that sinus-clearing inhalation. I have usually been able to overwinter them in containers outside but recently lost one of the large mop-head trained lemon verbenas that I inherited from a friend more than two decades ago. I use the leaves to make teas and tisanes and to flavour sugar. I harvest the leaves during summer and dry those that remain before autumn to make a refreshing pot pourri. To keep a succession of aromatic leaves going, I snip off the flowers as they appear and use them to flavour sugar.

Mint

A strong peppermint flavour comes to mind first and foremost when you think of mint, but mints with definite citrus hits are available, from lemon, lime and orange mint. They are all useful in salads, in summer drinks and the flowers are great pollinator magnets. In particular *Mentha x piperita citrata* 'Lime' has



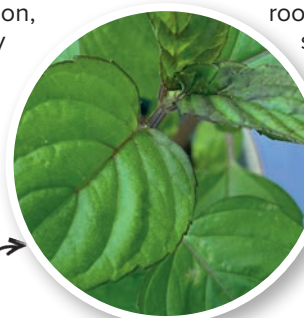
Barbara's favourite lemon verbena has a multitude of exciting culinary uses



rounded well-veined leaves that I use to flavour summer drinks as well as use in fresh fruit salads. As a variation there is 'Lemon' mint which is good to use combined with oil and vinegar to make a zesty dressing. I also use it when I make a batch of apple or crab apple jelly. Lemon mint adds another dimension of taste to mint sauce.

Lemon grass (*Cymbopogon citratus*)

Lemon grass (*Cymbopogon citratus*) is a tropical plant so I overwinter it in my greenhouse but keep it outdoors in the summer. Young foliage and, if it establishes well, young swollen leaf bases can be detached and used in Oriental-style cooking as well as in salads. Young leaves are best to use as they develop a tough texture as they mature. If I use shop-bought lemon grass whole, in one piece, say to flavour a laksa-style soup, I always remove it before serving. In past years I have rooted shop-bought lemon grass stems in water and planted them out. This year I was given some seed-raised young plants and am harvesting the young leaves for use in salads before they get too tough and hairy.



Do remember to keep these lovely mint herbs also contained or they will spread

Right: Some of Barbara's home-grown young lemongrass Inset below: Tangerine sage (*Salvia elegans* 'Tangerine')

I sow seed from January to May into a seed tray and cover with 5mm (¼ in) compost. The seeds need warmth of 13-21C and to keep them moist I cover them with a sheet of clear polythene, which I remove once the seedlings have germinated. When they are large enough to handle I harden them off and then transplant them into pots.

Tangerine sage (*Salvia elegans* 'Tangerine')

This plant is not hardy, but makes a good summertime display of red flowers and its leaves offer a delicious fruity but still citrus-flavoured aroma.

Basil (various species)

There are at least 13 different types of basil, with small leaves, frilly-edged leaves, large leaves, purple and purple-frilled. The flavours range from aniseed through to cinnamon and the sweet, spicy, clove-like scent of the 'ordinary' – well to me there is no ordinary – basil, also known as sweet basil. This also includes one or two with strong citrus notes. If I had to choose one lemon-scented herb for my desert island herb garden then it would have to be lemon basil, *Ocimum basilicum* var. *citriodorum*. This small-leaved, bushy basil with white flowers packs a powerful punch and revives my spirits as I harvest it in the greenhouse, and it transforms salads into culinary masterpieces.



I sow basil in spring into trays in a heated propagator in the greenhouse. When they are large enough to handle, I prick them out and pot them, two to three to a pot. I know that you can plant them out into the garden or grow them in containers on a patio during summer, but I prefer to keep them in the greenhouse, where I harvest regularly for daily use and to freeze for winter delights. 'Mrs Burns' Lemon' is a variety that has a very intense citrus flavour.

These herbs with lemony aromas are mood enhancers in the herb garden and they offer just as much pleasure when I

prepare them in the kitchen for use in salads or cooking. I enjoy chopping the various lemon herbs into my summer herb and leaf salads. I also use them to make various lemon-scented fruit jellies and, of course, use them fresh in cooked food.

Recipe ideas

- Use any of the lemon or orange herbs to make a zesty stuffing for a roast chicken dish.
- Lemon grass, finely sliced or young leaves roughly torn, combined with garlic and soy sauce will flavour marinades for Asian-style dishes.
- Lemon mint and lemon verbena will lift chocolate sauces and are also good dipped in chocolate and served with a fruit dessert.



Barbara can be found on Insta: [@barbarasegall](https://www.instagram.com/barbarasegall) and at thegardenpost.substack.com