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Using Lemon-Scented Herbs

- Mary Sisson Eibs

In the three years since I started writing this column my knowledge of growing and using herbs has grown. I can attribute a great deal of this growth to the reading and research I've done in order to provide you all with an increasing understanding of the wonderful possibilities associated with herb gardening. With this increase in knowledge has come the desire to experiment with some of the different varieties of herbs in a species.

One of my favorite scents in the herb garden is lemon. You've all heard of or grown thyme or basil, but have you ever tried lemon thyme or lemon basil? There are many, many types of lemon scented herbs readily available. Most are extremely hardy and easy to grow. Newer herb gardeners may feel intimidated by the idea of planting a less common variety of a given herb because they may not know how to use it. However, even if their use never extends beyond your herbal landscape they are worth planting.

As a maker of potpourri, I use many lemon scented herbs in my blends. They are always a favorite of visitors to my herb gardens and I encourage people to brush their hands over the plants to release their heavenly aroma. The first lemon scented herb I planted was lemon balm (*Melissa officinalis* 'Lemon Balm'). Because this plant is in the mint family I was afraid that it would take over my herb bed. However, it creates a lovely round mound of beautiful dark green foliage which enjoys being trimmed back at any time during the year. Lemon thyme (*Thymus x citiodorus* 'Golden King') was my next discovery. One of my herb beds is ringed with a border of this sprawling green/gold beauty. Another favorite is lemon basil. At the Herb Fair at the Tucson Botanical Gardens three years ago I bought several plants of Mrs. Burns' lemon basil from Native Seeds Search. These plants are so incredibly hardy that even in the height of this hot, dry summer I have trimmed them back severely three times and each time they have reached a height of two feet in a matter of days.

I have found lemon grass (*Cymbopogon citratus*) to be a little more challenging. I planted a couple of these plants after the Herb Fair in 1994. They did little more than "survive" until this spring when they rewarded me with wonderful tall, slender plants. I've been told that their bulbs will multiply in clumps so I'll need to watch for this. Years ago I tried growing lemon verbena (*Aloysia triphylla* (*Lippia citiodora*)) in pots on my porch. This experiment failed miserably. The plants proved to be extremely fussy about where they were placed and would die back completely after each attempt at repotting or trimming. I was told that they will usually come back after time but mine never did. I'd almost given up on ever successfully growing this plant until I finally had a home with garden space. Currently, I have two plants, one in full sun and one in partial shade. They're both doing well, but the one in the full sun is much bushier. I've trimmed them back many times and they continue to provide me with an abundance of lemon scented leaves.

I hope you will try growing some of these "lemon lovelies". They are easy to maintain and will provide hours of spectacular scents. Below are some ideas for using the abundant harvest you will have from these plants.

- * Substitute lemon basil for regular basil in pesto recipes. (My favorite!)
- * Add lemon thyme and lemon basil to white wine vinegar for dressings and marinades. Chop lemon verbena or lemon balm and add to fresh fruit salads.
- * Chop inner stalks and tender leaves of lemon grass and add to stuffing for poultry.
- * Add fresh leaves of lemon balm or lemon verbena to iced or hot tea.