



Drink the rewards of a pretty tea garden

A favorite ritual throughout history has been the cup of tea. Boiling the water, prepping the ingredients, rinsing the teapot with hot water, letting the tea steep; steamy and fragrant.

A cup of tea is brewed before curling up to read. When an illness strikes, a cup of something hot always makes us feel better. In the summer, when the humidity is high, sweet iced tea to help us cool off is part of the Southern tradition. It is an enjoyable substitute for coffee, with less caffeine. A cup of herbal tea for an ill child is comforting.

It is easy to enjoy tea, and adding *Camellia sinensis* var. *sinensis* and *C.*

sinensis var. *assamica* to the garden may be worth the effort. Loose leaf tea is of higher quality than tea in bags, and freshly made loose leaf tea is said to be superior. The plants behind green tea as well as oolong and black teas are in the genus *Camellia*, which is well adapted to this region. Having a garden with herbs, fruits and vegetables that are home-picked is a good strategy for adding diversity to the diet.

Camellia sinensis is also a flowering plant that relies on insects for pollination. A sustainable future means planting landscapes that value function as well as aesthetics. Plant something beautiful, but think about what can it be used it for, and what other creatures

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Tea

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can use it. Camellias are a lovely landscape plant that grow quite well in this locale. If camellias are being planted anyway, why not plant a variety used to make a highly versatile, favorite beverage?

Cultivated since ancient times in the Himalayas and China, a single bush can produce half a pound of tea, making it feasible for home gardeners to produce their own tea from relatively few plants.

To grow your own, start with a soil test, available from your county Extension office.

Plant camellia sinensis var sinensis or assam away from structures and trees in full sun to light shade. The plant grows well in soils that have a slightly acid to neutral pH, and are well drained. Leaf production is benefited by bi-monthly applications of complete fertilizer of at least 6-6-6-6Mg, with the addition of iron applications in the summer months.

For optimal production, when plants have reached 5 to 6 feet, they should be pruned back to 2 to 4 feet, which encourages new growth and manageability.

Tea is made from the new growth of the plant.

To harvest, pick the terminal bud and newest two to three leaves. You will get peak flavor from herbs picked in the morning when it has not rained, before essential oils of the plant have evaporated in the sun.

To make green tea, C.

sinensis var sinensis is preferred. Terminal leaves and bud are steamed or pan heated (with constant agitation to prevent burning), at 480 to 570°F for 10-15 minutes. Leaves are then allowed to dry at a low heat of 200 to 300°F before being stored in an airtight container.

The process of makingoolong tea includes allowing freshly harvested shoots to wilt in the sun for up to an hour and then drying in the shade for eight to 10 hours, stirring every hour. The leaves are then heated in a pan at 121 to 149°F for 15 minutes and then rolled and allowed to dry.

Black tea is made from the terminal bud plus two leaves. It is dried to 55 to 70 percent moisture, rolled, cut and allowed to ferment.

A very nice thing about making your own tea is that flavors can be customized to your own liking. Many of the herbs that flavor tea are easy to grow, and can be brewed on their own to make a fragrant cup.

To dry fresh-picked herbs, tie with a rubber band and hang upside down in a cool dark place for a week to 10 days.

Some herbs may retain more color by drying in a 150-degree oven for several hours. To prevent dust from settling as the herbs dry, cover with a paper bag. When crumbly, place whole leaves in glass or other airtight containers and store in a cool dark place. Fresh herbs are more fragrant than dried; adjust accordingly. Some favorite tea additions are: Lemon grass, lemon balm, and lemon verbena all add a citrusy flavor each with its own distinct characteristic. Mints are a cooling and uplifting addition. Ginger root is warming and comforting. Roselle can be added for a tangy boost of vitamin C. Anise-Hyssop is licorice flavored and may calm a cough. Borage, rosemary, raspberry leaf and oswego tea are all pleasant additions, as well as dried fruit such as citrus or apricots.

When using herbs, it is important to consult your physician, as some have relative contraindications to medications or pregnancy.

To make a great cup of tea start with a warm cup or teapot. Use about a teaspoon of tea or a tablespoon of dried herbs per six-ounce cup. Use water that has not quite reached a boil, as tea can "burn." When steeping your tea, keep it coveredto trap the flavors released in the steam.

Steep the tea for two to five minutes, and herbs up to 10 minutes, to taste.

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