

Edible Gingers

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When the VegHeadz started a perennial edible garden at the Leon County Extension Office, we really didn't know what to expect. We would get a cutting here, a rhizome there, some seeds or seedlings somewhere else. We often had little understanding of what the mature plant would look like, or how hardy or dependable it would be.

Three of those plants that have been the most dependable and easiest to grow as well as being attractive and producing interesting culinary additions, are the edible gingers, all members of the Zingiberaceae family—Galangal, Turmeric, and Ginger root.

Ginger root--(*Zingiber officianale*) The ginger we know as ginger root and experience in Asian dishes can be easily grown in our area. It makes wonderful tea, and can be boiled with sugar into a syrup that can be used to sweeten tea or lemonade, to flavor desserts, or to pour over hot cakes or waffles. Use it fresh in stir fries, soups, and desserts. Sprinkle minced ginger over vegetables before roasting; or include some in juices and smoothies. It always adds an extra zing as well as possible health benefits, including boosting your immune system, and relief from nausea.

Ginger can be grated, sliced, diced, minced, or crushed. Try peeling it by scraping with a spoon. The rhizomes keep in the refrigerator for a couple of weeks, and can be frozen and grated or sliced without thawing.

Turmeric—(*Curcuma longa*) We frequently eat turmeric, although we are usually unaware of it. It is used in bread and butter pickles and to color mustard, yellow rice, margarine and other foods of warm yellow color. It is also used to dye textiles. You should be careful when cutting turmeric as it tends to stain whatever it touches. The preferred pronunciation includes the “r” in the first syllable but ‘too-mer-ic’ is also acceptable.

Sometimes known as Indian saffron, fresh turmeric is used extensively in Thai cooking as well as in powdered form in many Asian and Indian dishes. It has an earthy unique flavor and scent. The leaves can be used to wrap fish or other ingredients in the way that we use cabbage, banana, or grape leaves, and they impart a distinctive flavor.

Turmeric pairs well with other spices such as cinnamon, pepper, nutmeg and ginger. In fact pepper is said to enhance the availability of its medicinal properties.

Unlike ginger, turmeric is harder to find in grocery stores, but when you do, it's easy to spot the intriguing bright orange toes or “hands.” It is also available in powdered form. The question most asked is, “What do you do with it? If you're using the fresh root, prepare as you would ginger root. Saute with carrots, onions, or celery, for any recipes that use cooked vegetables (like soups, stir-fries, chilies, stews).

When you make mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes or winter squash, simply add finely grated turmeric when mashing (about 1 teaspoon for every two potatoes). Add a little grated turmeric to salad dressings, rice, most any vegetables, coleslaw, egg dishes, pasta sauces, even baked goods.

If you're a smoothie fan, turmeric is the ideal booster to add to your smoothie repertoire. Orange turmeric pairs well with orange, pink or red superfoods like carrot, pumpkin, red bell pepper, strawberries, raspberries, goji berries and citrus. Add about a teaspoon of the minced root to your smoothie ingredients and blend away. Add finely grated (or powdered) turmeric to hot teas, coffee drinks, and low-sugar fruit juices like grapefruit and unsweetened cranberry.

Turmeric is used in extract form for medicinal purposes. It is reported to have anti-inflammatory and anti-microbial qualities and is said to provide relief for upset stomachs and to help curb the pain of arthritis. Of the edible gingers mentioned here, turmeric produces rhizomes most prolifically.

Galangal--(*Alpinia galanga*) Sometimes known as Thai ginger, it is used extensively in Thai, Vietnamese, and Indonesian cooking. Pronounced ga-LANG-geh, it is used in curry pastes, and in its fresh form is used in stir fries and soups. It deserves more of our attention as it produces a different spicier flavor than common ginger. It can be grated, sliced and then crushed or cut in matchsticks to add to your dishes. It is harder than ginger and will need to be cooked longer. Galangal has been used to ease respiratory complaints as a tea or inhalant, and is also said to have anti-microbial qualities.

Galangal is more difficult to find in the grocery store, but it makes a very attractive landscape plant, growing in a dense clump, with sprays of small white blooms in the summer. You'll need a shovel to release some of the rhizomes from the clump. This plant grows most vigorously of the three, but none of them grow out of control.

All these gingers can be propagated by planting rhizomes 2 to 5 inches deep. The ones you find in the grocery store will grow just fine. They can be planted in fall or spring. You can allow the rhizomes to sprout in a warm dry place out of direct sunlight before planting to get a head start and also to experience less chance of rotting. They are also suitable for growing in containers.

They all benefit from partial shade, particularly in the afternoon. They tolerate some drought but prefer evenly moist soil. Mulch overwintering plants and new plantings deeply to protect the roots. They die back in the winter, and usually sprout again in late spring as long as roots don't freeze. Or they can be dug up and overwintered in a cool dry place. Wash and dry the rhizomes first and then store in dry peat or sawdust.

They all benefit from harvesting at least every couple of years to keep the roots from overcrowding. Dig all or part of the clump, replanting a few "toes" for next year's crop. Try planting several clumps and harvesting in alternate years. Harvest when leaves start to turn yellow and dry out.

Last, a bonus ginger you might like to try—Cardamon (*Elettaria cardomomum*). The seed pods are commonly used as a spice in Indian cooking and in baked goods, and the leaves are also

scented. It is a larger and more tropical plant than the previous gingers, and needs protection from cold, perhaps by growing in a large container so it can be moved to shelter when necessary. It can be grown from seed or by dividing the root ball. Cardamon prefers more shade, and can reach 10 to 12 feet. In a protected location with a Southern exposure and deep mulch to protect the roots, it might very well die back in winter and return in spring as the other gingers mentioned here do. It has been reported to grow as far north as Gainesville. I think it's worth a try.

Some uses for cardamon--use whole cardamom paired with cinnamon or cumin to infuse basmati rice; add a little ground cardamom to your coffee grinds for a North African style coffee; brew green tea with a whole crushed cardamom pod; use in rice pudding or in place of vanilla in desserts such as flan, bread pudding, or shortbread cookies.

When the VegHeadz recently shared our fall bounty of edible gingers with other Master Gardeners, they disappeared like snow in July. So there may soon be someone you know who will be willing to share their harvest with you to add to your garden.

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