



Growing an *Herbal Tea* Garden

BY KRIS HILL
PHOTO BY CAROLE TOPALIAN

As spring approaches, many of us start thinking about gardening—it's the perfect time for planning and developing new additions to your landscape. An herbal, medicinal tea garden is an easy addition to any backyard or container garden. It's also a fantastic way to fatten up your larder for the winter months and lessen your herbal carbon footprint with the satisfaction of knowing where your tea has come from. I've noticed that the plants I grow at this elevation tend to be stronger and more resilient, making for stronger medicine.

After deciding where to plant your new herbs, the next step is deciding which herbal teas are your favorites. Most common herbs will grow here in Montana, and many of these plants will grow easily in one season from seeds or young starts. Here are some suggestions:

Peppermint *Mentha piperita*

Among the oldest European herbs, peppermint is used extensively in foods and teas as a digestive aid. This hardy perennial, with square stems and pinkish flowering spikes, will take over your garden if not watched. For tea: Collect leaves before the flowers open, and dry out of direct sunlight. One heaping teaspoon to one cup hot water.

Chamomile *Matricaria recutita* or *M. chamomilla*

A European plant with a long history in herbal medicine, chamomile is known for its digestive aid properties, and is a mild sleep aid and mildly anti-microbial. Chamomile flowers yellow with age. For tea:

Collect the flowers and dry whole, out of direct sunlight. Two teaspoons to one cup hot water.

Echinacea *Echinacea angustifolia* or *E. purpurea*

Echinacea angustifolia is our native variety in Montana. It loves to grow with Limestone, and the purple to pink flowers attract bees and butterflies. The main herbal action of this plant is anti-microbial. *Echinacea* will need to grow in your garden for at least four years before it can be used. Although it's best used fresh, dried tea can be used within one year. The roots store the big medicine, but the flowers may be collected and dried for tea. For tea: Harvest roots in the autumn of the fourth year. One heaping teaspoon of roots or flowers to one cup hot water.

Marshmallow *Alethaea officinalis*

Marshmallow is a fantastic demulcent commonly used for soothing a sore throat. The root is mainly utilized, although the leaves may be collected prior to flowering. It's helpful for inflammation of the digestive tract and throat, and aids in clearing lung mucus. Eat one of the fantastically blue flowers to detect the unique flavor and soothing action. For tea: Collect the roots in the autumn of the 3rd year, and cut and dry out of direct sunlight. One heaping teaspoon to one cup hot water.

Bee Balm *Monarda fistulosa*, *M. didyma*

Monarda is a common native flower in Montana and another member of the mint family with showy purple to pink flowers. It's highly anti-



microbial because of the active constituent thymol, also found in thyme. When you pick the flowers you will notice the pungent smell. For tea: Pick the flowers in bloom and dry, or use to make your own herbal honey to store for winter. Two whole flowers to one cup hot water.

Yarrow *Achillea millefolium*

Although Yarrow comes in many colors, the variety used in herbal medicine is white. This plant is aromatic, a bitter tonic that is warming to the body. This anti-microbial is also great in the bath when you're feeling cold. For tea: Collect the flowers and dry. One teaspoon to one cup hot water.

Lemon Balm *Melissa officinalis*

Another mint family member that grows well here in Montana, this herb is known as a central nervous system calmer and an anti-microbial. The purple flowering spike is attractive to bees and butterflies, and it likes full sun with afternoon shade. The leaves should be dark green with a lovely lemon scent when crushed. For tea: Collect leaves before flowering and dry. One heaping teaspoon to one cup hot water.

For more information on herbal medicine, teas, where to get seeds and plants, what grows well here, and more, stop by Hill Botanical or visit our Web site at www.hillbotanical.com. *eB*

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