

Grow Herbs for Summer Fragrance

By Susan Camp

Juicy green leaves, delicate flowers, heavenly scents—what could be more pleasant than an herb garden in summer? Herbs have always been my favorite plants to grow. I have had my share of failures with herbs, but overall, they have provided me with the greatest pleasure of any of the plants in the garden.

Most herbs aren't too fussy; they don't require a lot of work. Many herbs are Mediterranean natives, which means they thrive in the full sun of hot summers. Some require more alkaline soil than we can provide, but we can remedy that over time with the addition of dolomitic lime, wood ashes, or organic compost. Most thrive in average to poor soil, don't require a lot of water or pruning, and resist or tolerate deer.

Many herbs are members of the Mint family, and we all know that some Mint family members can escape their confines and overrun the garden. These Mint cousins should be planted in containers or monitored faithfully for runaways. You probably know that you can recognize Mints by their square stems. You can also identify many Mints by their characteristic fragrances.

Lavender is one herb fragrance that most people recognize. I have written in the past about my difficulties with growing lavender. I had tried numerous lavender species and cultivars, but without much success until I discovered *Lavandula angustifolia* 'Platinum Blonde,' an English lavender cultivar with glowing cream and yellow-green variegated foliage and bright purple-blue flowers on stiff upright stems. 'Platinum Blonde' lasted for about 5 years before succumbing to a particularly harsh winter cold snap. I would plant it again.

Two seasons ago, I discovered *Lavandula x intermedia* 'Grosso,' a French hybrid lavender commonly called lavandin and also known as 'Fat Spike' lavender for its long, sturdy stems and plump buds. This vigorous grower reaches a height of 2 to 2 ½ feet with a similar spread. 'Grosso' is a shrubby, mounded plant. The stems with their wide gray-green leaves grow outward from the plant center, terminating in dark blue flower spikes up to 2 inches long. The fragrance is intense and the plant is used to produce lavender essential oil for aromatherapy and for ornamental products like lavender wreaths, wands, and floral arrangements. We like 'Grosso' so much that we added three new plants this spring.

Another favorite perennial herb is winter savory (*Satureja montana*), a native of southern Europe and southwestern Asia and, like lavender, a member of the Mint family. Winter savory is often used fresh or dried as a culinary herb to flavor stews and meat dishes. The flavor is slightly bitter and enhances roast beef or pork. Winter savory has a milder, peppery-tasting cousin, summer savory (*Satureja hortensis*) that is usually grown as an annual. Both savories have a long history of medicinal use for a variety of illnesses.

Winter savory is a low-growing shrubby perennial with woody stems, lance-shaped, glossy dark green leaves, and a pungent fragrance. Tiny white or lavender flowers appear in midsummer. You can cut back the flowers to produce new leaves.

Lemon balm (*Melissa officinalis*) is an easy-to-grow member of the Mint family, a native of southern Europe that has escaped gardens and naturalized in many Eastern, Midwestern, and Pacific Northwest states. Lemon balm is easy to grow, but it self-seeds, so you may find yourself pulling up unwanted seedlings. It will need light shade to protect it from the summer sun.

The leaves are wrinkled and light to medium yellow-green. Leaves, stems, and flowers all have a pleasant lemon-mint scent. The tiny, two-lipped white flowers bloom in mid to late summer. Bees flock to lemon balm. Unfortunately, the plant has a tendency to look scruffy when blooming. You can shear back the flowers, but you will lose the bees. Lemon balm is used to make a relaxing tea.

See the Missouri Botanical Garden Plant Finder for more detailed information on these lovely, aromatic garden herbs.

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