

Some Not-So-Famous Herbs and Spices

by Yvonne Kochanowski

UCCE El Dorado County Master Gardener

We're all well acquainted with the usual culprits, the basil and mints, oreganos and thymes, parsleys and sages. In case you aren't, these are some of the more popular herbs grown today. Dill, chives and catnip are also big favorites.

Why do we grow herbs and spices in the first place? The answer is to have something fresh, dried or as seeds to add to our cooking. Over the years, herbs have been associated with certain medicinal qualities as well.

Here are some great examples! Whatever your favorites are, make this the year to try something new in your herb garden, and while you're at it, try out a new cooking recipe or preparation too!

Lemon Balm: This perennial herb gets its delightful Latin name of *Melissa officinalis* from the Greek word for honeybees. It is a fragrant plant, said to have a calming effect, and most often its fresh leaves are brewed as a tea. The lemony scent is an added bonus in bouquets as well!

German Chamomile: This happy, some say invasive, annual self-seeder is primarily used for its flowers. *Matricaria recutita* is popular when brewed into a tea with claims that it aids in digestion, and some say it also has a calming effect. It attracts good bugs to onions and cucumbers as well.

Epazote: *Chenopodium ambrosioides* is an aromatic annual herb used in Mexican and Central American cooking. Dried or fresh, its taste alone is mild, and it is commonly used to spice beans where its claim to fame is rounding out their rich natural flavor while reducing those unpleasant side effects!

Cilantro/Coriander: Use this annual herb, *Coriandrum sativum*, for its leaves or seeds, and you will be tasting something the pharaohs of Egypt dined upon! Found in ancient tombs, it can be used fresh, dried, as whole seeds or ground, and can be both pungent and sweet at the same time. Flower heads attract beneficial insects too!

Stevia: This perennial herb dates back a few centuries in popularity as a no-calorie-or-carbs sugar substitute, tasting 300 times sweeter than white sugar. Recently making a comeback, *Stevia rebaudiana* can be used fresh or dried in both hot and cold foods.

Tarragon: Like licorice? Then *Tagetes lucida* is for you! This perennial plant grows into a clump with thick stems that make great skewers. Anise-flavored leaves are great in vinegars and teas as well as in cooking, and make a terrific accompaniment to eggs and fish.

Borage: Said to have qualities that serve as an adrenal stimulant, *Borago officinalis* is an annual that features edible leaves and purple-blue flowers. When brewed into a tea, the flavor is like a mild cucumber, the perfect refresher for a hot day when mixed with mint.

Anise Hyssop: Commonly known as a form of hummingbird mint, *Agastache foeniculum* is a perennial that will please the bees and butterflies in your garden as well. Dry the flower stems by hanging them upside down and make a wonderful pick-me-up tea during those cold winter months.

And just because I couldn't resist, let's not forget...

Basils: There are so many different varieties of *Ocimum basilicum* on the market these days that it is hard to keep count! These annuals vary based on highlighted flavor and size, but all are used to spice up everything from raw vegetables to cooked foods. Try a new variety with a different kind of flavor, use larger leaves to make lettuce wraps, or dry some to spice up your winter soups and stews!

The descriptions of these medicinal uses are included solely for historical informational purposes and should not be construed as a guide or recommendation for use as medicinal treatment.

Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome. The office is located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at http://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at <http://ucanr.edu/mgenews/>. You can also find us on Facebook.

Saturday, July 14th, Master Gardeners will present a free three-hour class on “Salsa Gardening”. When this article went to press, class location information was not available. Please check the website or call the Master Gardener Office for the class site.