

Home-Grown Cocktail Gardening

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Add a new dimension to your garden plantings this year.

AFTER A LONG DAY OUT TENDING THE GARDEN, I find it most satisfying to grab a handful of fresh herbs on my way inside. That's my favorite way to begin happy hour.

Gardening should always be a labor of love, and one of the best ways to enjoy the fruits of your labor is to incorporate the flavors and beauty of your garden into a relaxing moment to toast your garden and yourself with a special cocktail. There are endless possibilities for what to concoct once you begin muddling your classic cocktails with your fresh homegrown herbs.

You'll likely find that some of the most inspired gardening ideas come from a happy hour stroll through the garden with a fresh drink in hand!

COCKTAIL GARDENING

Cocktail creativity is flourishing these days, with endless combinations of complex ingredients. Yet, there are many simple ways to bring the refreshing flavors of the garden into your glass for some hyper-local enjoyment.

You can create many new cocktails, or variations on classics, by adding a few herbs to your garden or to a beautiful container garden for a smaller patio space. Cocktail gardening is a fun and easy way to get your hands dirty and spice up your happy hour

menu. Ideally, your home-grown cocktail garden is in sight of your favorite cocktail sipping spot so that inspiration can strike at any moment!

Although taste preferences may differ, there's a perfect cocktail herb list to delight every palate. But part of the fun of having a cocktail garden is experimenting with new combinations of some classic homegrown herbs.

I hope you explore new substitutions or simply add a handful of herbs to one of your favorite cocktails.

COCKTAIL HERBS

Here are a few of my favorite homegrown cocktail additions:

Mint is a classic cocktail plant. It may be best known for brightening up a whiskey on a hot summer day when used in a mint julep. Mint is one of my favorite homegrown cocktail herbs because it can be harvested throughout the summer, and it flushes back with new growth quickly. Mint is a vigorous grower and is always best confined to a container, unless you want an entirely mint-based garden!

TIP: Be sure to clap your mint, not muddle it (even in juleps), to release the plant's oils into your drink without destroying the leaves.



Basil has so many uses besides Italian dishes



Strawberries are a tasty choice to include in your cocktail garden.



Mint is a classic cocktail plant that's a must in your garden.



Jenkin's Basil Old Fashioned is garden fresh!

Lemon balm is related to mint and shares its ability to spread all over your garden. Not surprisingly, it has a lemony flavor. Lemon balm is great in cocktails or as an addition to iced tea. I'd recommend buying a starter plant at your local nursery, then dividing and sharing with your friends as it continues to grow!

Nasturtiums are beautiful trailing annual plants that bloom prolifically in summer. The flowers are edible and can range anywhere from red to orange to yellow, depending on the variety. They have a spicy, peppery flavor, making them tasty additions to salads. For cocktails, nasturtiums flowers float beautifully in a coupe glass, or they could be muddled into a margarita. I love to grow nasturtiums in containers throughout my garden because they spill out in trailing vines punctuated by colorful flowers.

TIP: Buy a packet or two of nasturtium seeds and plant some of the seeds in the garden once each month for continual summer blooms. And colorful cocktails.

Strawberries are great perennial plants to include in your cocktail garden.

The best strawberries you'll ever taste are the ones you've grown in your own garden. And the varieties available are endless. My favorites, aptly called ever-bearing, continue to produce all summer long, allowing me to use a few strawberries in drinks well into August! Strawberries can also be used to infuse vodka or muddled with tequila to add fresh flavor to your favorite drinks.

TIP: As the strawberry plants scramble over the edges of your garden, share the runners with friends or plant them in a hanging basket.

BASIL OLD FASHIONED

- 2 oz. gin
- 1 oz. lemon or lime juice (depending on preference and pantry staples)
- .5 oz. simple syrup
- A dash of bitters
- A few basil leaves

Add all ingredients, except for the basil, to a cocktail shaker.

Clap your basil leaves (don't muddle them) and add all but one to the shaker. Shake vigorously with ice.

Pour into a coupe glass. Float the remaining leaf or flowers on the top.

Toast to your homegrown cocktail!

Variation: Muddle in strawberries



No surprise here—lemon balm adds a lemon flavor good in iced teas.



Edible flowers anyone? Nasturtiums add a spicy, peppery flavor.

Basil is often associated with Italian dishes, but it has so many other possibilities when it comes to cocktails. Throughout the summer, I pinch back my basil plants to help them fill out, and often find myself with a few spare basil leaves. Those few leaves aren't enough to create a batch of pesto, but they work beautifully for creating a Basil Old Fashioned. Why not incorporate the pinched leaves into something beautiful, while helping the plant on its way to pesto-making perfection?

TIP: Purchase several different varieties of basil at your local nursery center and get inspired to try them all in various cocktails! Taste test, anyone?

Incorporating the gifts from your garden into your cocktails is a great way to experiment with new uses for common herbs. Think

about switching out different herbs in some of your favorite cocktails or experiment with creating your own specialty cocktail. For an extra level of difficulty, try to use all parts of these edible herb—from the leaves to the flowers.

As you continue to build your homegrown cocktail garden and recipes, be sure to share them with friends for a true happy hour. Cheers! ♦

Images courtesy of Jenkins Arboretum & Gardens, taken by Maddison Perzel

Jenkins Arboretum & Gardens is a 48-acre public garden showcasing native flora of the eastern United States and a world-class collection of rhododendrons and azaleas. Explore the gardens virtually for now by visiting JenkinsArboretum.org.