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Grow Your Own Tea Garden



By [Gemma Alexander](#)

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Engaging in [nature-based activities](#) is an effective way for everyone in the family to improve mental health. Gardening can be challenging for those without space, time, or talent. But even a hopeless brown thumb with a tight schedule and limited space might succeed with a low-maintenance, hardy tea garden.

Helping something grow can bring tremendous satisfaction, even if you live in a natural area. Growing [vegetables](#) you can cook and eat adds another layer of satisfaction and accomplishment. Gardening is an obvious choice for people who need easy access to wilderness, and tea is an easy-to-grow option.

Not That Tea Garden

When people talk about tea gardens, they usually refer to a specific type of Japanese landscape called a *cha niwa*. Japanese tea gardens are beautiful, calming spaces that complement a traditional tea ceremony. Although they are usually small and rustic with a very limited plant palette, their design follows a strict formula and is not low maintenance.

A better choice for beginner and casual gardeners is a tea garden where you grow your own tea to brew and drink.

Camellia Sinensis

Tea drinkers know that the variations of their favorite beverage can be as nuanced as [wine](#). And like wine, [tea production](#) has a significant environmental footprint. One way to reduce that footprint is to grow your tea. Whether you drink black tea, green tea, or oolong, it comes from [Camellia sinensis](#), a close relative to the popular evergreen shrub flowering.

Tea camellias do not produce the same showy flowers as ornamental species but have similar growing requirements. Camellias do not withstand severe or prolonged freezing and require consistent water.

If you live in humid parts of the [U.S. Department of Agriculture's Zones 8-11](#) and can provide your garden with lots of water year-round, tea plants are a low-maintenance evergreen. Specialty camellia nurseries sell many different cultivars of *Camellia sinensis*, so you can grow various types, each of which will impart its unique flavor to your homemade tea.

Herbal Teas

While true tea plants can be demanding, almost anyone can grow herbs and use the leaves and flowers for tea. There is virtually an unlimited [choice of herbs](#) appropriate for herbal teas, more appropriately called [tisanes](#).

Herbs tend to be low-maintenance perennials that often require very little space. Many of the most popular herbs are Mediterranean, meaning they don't need much [watering](#). Since the newer leaves are usually best for making tea, the plants can be kept small and even grown [indoors](#) in pots.

Chamomile flowers, lavender, and mint leaves are classic options for tea drinkers and beginning gardeners. Any herb with a citrusy flavor, like lemongrass, lemon verbena, or lemon balm, also makes good teas. Some more unusual options that may be slightly more challenging include the many varieties of basil – which is usually grown as an annual – and *Hibiscus sabdariffa*, which must be brought indoors in winter.

Because they are so hardy, some herbs can become invasive in many regions. Plants like mint and lemon balm are best kept in containers, and you will still need to keep a vigilant eye out for escapees in the rest of your garden.



Making Tea

True tea is harvested by cutting the new leaves off the camellia plant as frequently as every two weeks. [The processing](#) depends on the type of tea being produced. It can be complicated, involving steaming, crushing, and even fermentation.

There are [many methods](#) for making herbal teas as well. Herbal infusions can be made directly from fresh leaves during the growing season or dried for use later. Generally, leaves will taste better if harvested before the plant flowers. Pruning can delay flowering, or you can allow the plant to flower and use the dried blossoms to make tea.

For infusions, pour boiling water over the leaves. Decocting may work better for coarser leaves, berries, and seeds. In this case, the plant material should be placed in boiling water until the tea is ready. Never use an aluminum pot to prepare a tisane; [even anodized aluminum](#) can react with acidic materials and leach toxins. In most cases, you'll want to remove the leaves before you drink the tea, either bundling leaves in cheesecloth before steeping or pouring the steeped tea over a filter into your cup.

Steeping times vary from steeping a couple of minutes up to 15 minutes. The desired volume and strength of tea, the type of herb, whether leaves are whole, crushed, or chopped, and the freshness of the herbs will all affect the result.

You can look at the instructions for similar commercial tea preparations or [look up brewing instructions online](#) for a starting point. One of the great pleasures of growing your tea in the garden is experimenting with the harvest to create your perfect cup of tea.



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