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How to Grow Lemon Balm: The Complete Guide



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Planting, Growing, and Harvesting Lemon Balm

By Samantha Johnson

Last Updated: April 18, 2025



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Are you familiar with lemon balm? If not, it's time to discover this beneficial herb.

Plant around the border of your garden to attract bees because lemon balm has a special relationship with these pollinators. Plus, it has proven benefits for humans—as this herb is a “balm” to soothe anxiety. Learn all about growing lemon balm—it's easy to love!

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About Lemon Balm

Lemon balm (*Melissa officinalis*) likes to grow and isn't shy about expanding its footprint in your garden; it IS a member of the mint family, after all! Thankfully, it is easily corralled and the benefits lemon

Lemon balm is grown widely all across the United States and is native to Europe and Africa. It's generally hardy to about Zone 4. It tends to be a short-lived perennial, lasting a few years in the garden.

In looks, the leaves are not dissimilar to mint. When crushed, the leaves have a lovely lemon-like scent! An attractive, bushy herb, lemon balm that reaches about 2 feet tall at maturity. Most varieties have green leaves, although some cultivars exhibit variegated or yellow leaves.

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you're interested in attracting pollinators to your garden, lemon balm is a beautiful choice that will delight all the bees in your neighborhood.

Try planting this herb around the border of any garden bed to attract pollinators and repel pests. With its spreading ability, it's also a good ground cover, especially in rock gardens, and works well in a small pot or patio planter.

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PLANTING

Lemon balm prefers full sun, so aim for that if possible. Partial shade can also be okay, but even though lemon balm can handle a bit of shade, sunlight is important for top flavor. It performs best in

University, lemon balm prefers a soil pH of 4.5 to 7.6.

When to Plant

- Start seeds indoors 4 to 6 weeks before your last frost date. (See your local frost dates.)
- Germination can be slow and takes about 2 weeks (sometimes a little more). Be patient!
- You can also direct sow seeds outdoors after the danger of frost has passed.

How to Plant

- When direct sowing, space seeds approximately 3 to 6 inches apart and plant them 1/4- to 1/2-inch deep.
- If transplanting seedlings into the garden, space them about 18 inches apart.
- Thin your direct-sown seedlings to the same spacing (18 inches) in the garden bed.

GROWING

weeds. In addition, if you don't want this herb to spread aggressively, be sure to cut it down after it flowers. Here are more growing tips.

- Avoid over-watering. Lemon balm is particularly sensitive to root rot.
- Organic mulches like grass clippings, leaves, or compost can help keep the soil moist but not over-saturated, which can help avoid root rot.
- Mulch can also act as a natural fertilizer, feeding the soil as it slowly breaks down.
- To keep lemon balm from taking over the garden, you may need to occasionally cut the spreading rhizomes with a shovel or snip flowers to avoid extensive seeding.
- Your soil and climate can affect the shade of your lemon balm's leaves.
- In zones where lemon balm is a perennial, you may need to start over with new plants after 3 or 4 years.
- In the fall, you can cut back your lemon balm, leaving just a few inches

This can help the plant to overwinter more successfully.

- Container-grown lemon balm can be brought indoors to overwinter.
- Lemon balm is super-easy to propagate. It grows well from seed, and you can propagate it by division or stem cuttings.
- As a member of the mint family, lemon balm likes to spread, and you should have no trouble growing it enough to split by division.
- Stem cuttings are also easy, just propagate as you would any stem cutting.



Lemon balm is a beautiful (and useful!) addition to the garden and is easy to propagate and harvest. Photo Credit: Simone Andress

Types

- ‘All Gold’ is a stunning, gold-

- ‘Lime’ has a slightly different scent, more lime-like than lemon-like.
- ‘Compacta’ is an excellent choice for container growth; it is more compact than other varieties. It is sterile, according to the [University of Illinois Extension](#).

HARVESTING

Ready to harvest lemon balm? Here are a few tips:

When to Harvest

- You can harvest lemon balm just about any time! It tolerates being cut back so you can harvest frequently and regularly throughout the growing season.
- When your plant has reached 2+ inches tall, you can begin harvesting small amounts. As the plant continues growing, you can harvest larger portions at a time, but never more than one-third of the plant at a time.

How to Harvest

pruners to snip entire stems.

- Use fresh lemon balm when possible but also you can dry lemon balm by hanging bundles of sprigs upside down to save for later. Freezing is also a fine option.
- Store dried leaves in an airtight container.

Best Time to Harvest for Best Flavor

- It's said that lemon balm flavor peaks right before the plant begins flowering.
- Harvest in the morning after the dew has evaporated.
- For maximum flavor, select the youngest lemon balm leaves for fresh use. New growth has more flavor.



It's easy to harvest and dry lemon balm in bundles.

Photo Credit: Daniel Johnson / Fox Hill Photo

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PESTS/DISEASES

There are no serious pests or diseases for lemon balm.

- Powdery mildew is common. It's often caused by poor air circulation, so keeping the plant's foliage under control can help. If it persists, you may have to cut the plant back to just a few inches tall and let it start over.
- Only a few insects like aphids and whiteflies bother lemon balm.
- Mammals generally avoid lemon balm.
Deer are resistant to the scent/taste of lemon balm and rabbits usually aren't interested either.
- Some gardeners actually use lemon balm as a deterrent to keep deer away from the garden.
- Root rot is a known issue and is caused by over-watering. This can be tricky as lemon balm requires moist soil for optimal growth.

- Lemon balm was named Herb of the Year in 2007 by the International Herb Association for its outstanding characteristics.
- The herb is mentioned as a furniture polish in Shakespeare's comedy, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. The scene reads: "The several chairs of order look you scour / With juice of balm and every precious flower."
- Lemon balm is said to have relaxing properties and is also said to soothe indigestion.

COOKING NOTES

- Lemon balm is surprisingly versatile in the kitchen, but it is most commonly used in beverages, including teas, juice, and punch.
- Fresh lemon balm is a lovely addition to salad dressings.
- It pairs well with poultry and fish.
- It can even be used in sweet dishes, including ice cream.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Samantha Johnson is an award-winning author and gardening expert with over 20 years of experience cultivating heirloom vegetables and sharing her passion for rural living. [Read More from Samantha Johnson](#)

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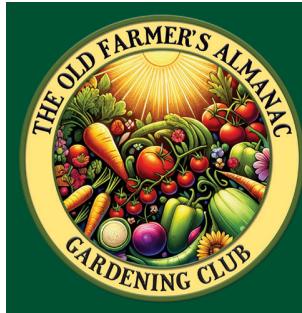
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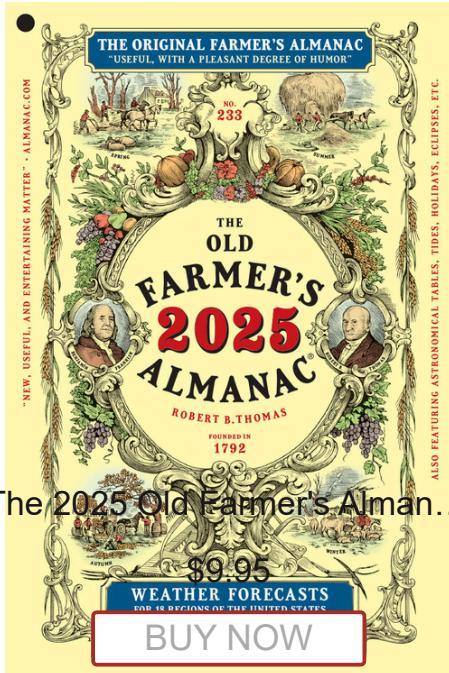
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