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# How to Grow Citronella Plants



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# Learn How to Plant, Grow, and Care for Citronella Plants

By [Andy Wilcox](#)

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The citronella plant is an attractive foliage plant with a lemony scent and lacy leaves. It can be grown in the garden, in pots, or as a houseplant. But does it chase away mosquitos? Learn more about growing citronella plants.

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## About Citronella Plants

Citronella plants are scented geraniums, *Pelargonium citrosum* or *Pelargonium graveolens*. With their lacy leaves, citronellas make excellent foliage pots and, with proper care, routinely grow 2 to 3 feet tall and wide.

*They make an inviting and pleasant-*

den, add texture to mixed containers, and can also be used in a summer border.

The plants produce pink flowers outdoors in the summertime. The citronella fragrance comes from the plant's leaves, which release their scent when rubbed. The leaves' lacy shape and the plant's fragrance make these a nice addition to flower arrangements.

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# Do citronella plants come back every year?

They are tender perennials—hardy in USDA Zones 9 to 11—so most people grow them as annuals. They won't tolerate a frost and usually get dropped into the compost pile at the end of the season.

If you don't want them to disappear in autumn or need a midwinter pick-me-up, you can grow them indoors as houseplants. You'll need to provide plenty of light, at least six hours daily. While a bright, sunny, south-facing window can suffice, you may need to provide supplemental lighting in winter's dark, short days.

Fortunately, these scented geraniums can also be propagated, so you can grab a few cuttings and grow a smaller version of the plant over winter instead of trying to harbor a large planter in the living room.

# Do citronella plants really keep mosquitoes away?

They're often called mosquito plants because they smell like the citronella oil repellent used in sprays, candles, and other bug-repellent products. Brush your hands against the foliage, and you'll get a whiff of a bright, citrusy smell.

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But if it sounds too good to be true, it likely is. The idea of planting easy-to-grow, beautiful, and unique geraniums to

When the leaves are rubbed or bruised, they release oils that have mosquito-repellent properties. However, the plant itself does NOT chase skeeters off your deck. You won't smell the odor without touching the leaves. The results, both scientifically and anecdotally, don't support the claim or hope that these plants will deter the winged pests.

But they are worth growing anyway—they look fantastic and smell amazing. The lacy shape of the leaves, as well as the fragrance, make citronella a nice addition to flower arrangements.

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## PLANTING

Citronella plants can be planted outdoors once the weather warms and all danger of

them out (unless they were growing outside without shelter at the garden center).

You'll need a container or in-ground site with good drainage, as perpetually wet soil can lead to root rot. While these citronella-scented geraniums like 6 to 8 hours of full sun, they'll do fine with 4 to 6 hours. In hot summers, they will appreciate some afternoon shade.

## **When to Plant Citronella Plants**

Wait to set out or plant citronella plants in spring until all danger of frost has passed and the nights have begun to warm. They won't tolerate a frost, and garden centers love to set out tender plants early in spring, knowing we can't wait to scratch the gardening itch. Then, they sell us more plants a week or two later. Be patient and allow the weather to settle before planting citronella plants outdoors.



*Leafy citronella in pots. Credit:  
ThamKC*

## How to Plant Citronella Plant

Citronella plants purchased from a nursery or garden center are easy to transplant. Don't forget to harden them off prior to planting outdoors.

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- Choose a new pot with adequate drainage. It's okay to use a larger pot

rule. Your new citronella plant will

grow into it quickly.

- Fill the pot partway with a good-quality potting mix and set the plant in, testing for depth. You'll want to match the new depth in the pot with the top of the rootball.
- Trim off any girdling or circling roots, and score the rootball if the plant is pot-bound.
- Place the plant in the hole, and continue filling with potting mix, firming the soil as you go to remove air pockets.
- Water the plant well until water comes out of the drainage holes at the bottom.

Citronella plants can also be planted right out in the garden. Choose a spot with good drainage, and add some compost.

Plant the same way you would a pepper or other nursery start.

## GROWING

- Provide weekly water if you haven't re-

their roots to reach more water when planted in containers. Those in pots will need more frequent watering.

- Snip or prune any errant stems. A light pinching or pruning will help to form a bushier plant.
- Fertilize container-grown citronella plants with a diluted fertilizer biweekly or monthly when watering. Those grown in the ground may not need extra nutrients if you add compost when planting. If the growth is vigorous and lush, they're doing fine.

## Propagating Citronella

Instead of trying to overwinter a large plant, take cuttings in late summer and root them. You'll be able to grow the new young plants in a small container over winter and plant them out again in spring.

- Take softwood cuttings (the growing tips, not the big woody base of the stems), which are 3–5 inches long.
- Remove the bottom leaves.
- Dip the fresh cut ends in rooting hor-

great; just be sure to poke holes in the bottom for drainage.

- Place the cuttings in bright but indirect light and transfer to direct sunlight or a grow light once new vegetation grows. Keep the soil moist.

Cuttings take 5–8 weeks to root and take hold.

Alternatively, citronella plant cuttings will also root well in water. Take the cuttings as above and place them in a clear glass jar filled with clean water. Place the jar in a bright, warm, not-sunny location, and change the water weekly.

## GARDENING PRODUCTS



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## WIT AND WISDOM

- Some people are allergic to the oils after rubbing the leaves vigorously on their skin. Be sure to test a small spot first to ensure you aren't allergic. Also, citronella is toxic to pets, so make sure they don't have access to citronella plant.
- If looking for a natural source of citronellal, the oil used to make citronella, check out lemon balm, lemon grass (*Cymbopogon citratus*), and citronella grass (*C. nardus*).

**FLOWERS**



Andy Wilcox is a flower farmer and master gardener with a passion for soil health, small producers, forestry, and horticulture.

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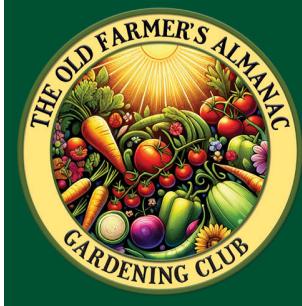
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**Peggy (not verified)** 7 months 1 week ago

I have had an outdoor citronella plant make it over the winter in zone 8 for a couple of years.

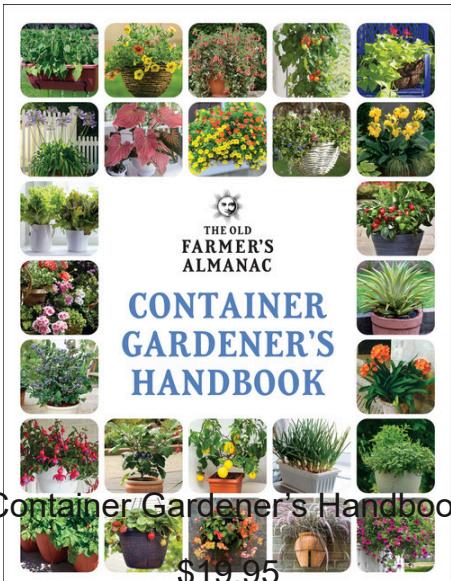
It was near some stone steps and I mulched it

well with dry leaves

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