Lemon Verbena

Aloysia citriodora (Lippia triphylla)



Height: 2 – 3 m

Suitable for: Dry, sunny, protected position, pots and containers

Summary: Lemon verbena is a slightly tender perennial shrub with long pointed leaves, and the best lemon scent in the 'herb world', giving it lots of culinary uses.

With an elegant shape and lots of lemony aroma to the foliage, this is a great herb to grow near outdoor living areas.

More information:

Lemon verbena is a perennial woody shrub which can grow to 3 m in height under ideal conditions, although this is rarely achieved in the UK unless grown in a glasshouse environment. Later in the summer it produces sprays of tiny white or pale lilac flowers.

Originating in South America it was introduced to Europe by Spanish explorers and is now an increasingly popular herb throughout much of the world.

Although it is a perennial herb, it is very sensitive to the cold, losing its leaves as temperatures approach freezing. The woody parts are more hardy and can withstand temperatures as low as -10ºC as long as the roots are kept dry. This makes it very suitable for growing in a container which can be moved under cover during the wettest, coldest months of the year.

Its final pot should be at least 30cm or more in diameter with well drained compost, drainage is the key to success as the roots will die if constantly wet. Feed well throughout the growing season and make sure that it has the sunniest spot to ensure that there are the strongest essential oils in the leaves.

The foliage has a powerful and true scent of lemon, of all the lemon scented herbs this is the ultimate and best.

The leaves can be harvested throughout the growing season, in fact pruning helps to prevent the plant becoming too leggy and promotes good bushy growth.

The leaves are used increasingly in cooking, and in the last few years it has changed from being an uncommon ingredient to being mentioned increasingly in recipes.

The leaves have the best flavour when fresh and can be used with fish and chicken, in marinades and salad dressings, and widely in desserts, drinks and preserves.

The most common use for the herb is probably in a herbal tea, either alone or mixed with other herbs such as mint.

Several sprigs infused in a small tea pot will give a lovely refreshing tisane, sweeten to taste if you wish with a touch of honey. This maybe chilled to give a cool drink to sip on a summer's evening, it goes really well with anything chocolately!

For winter use the leaves can either be dried in bundles in a dark dry place, and stored whole in sealed jars, or frozen chopped in ice-cube trays of water.

Alternatively the two methods shown below will preserve the superb lemon flavour excellently.

A simple syrup is an easy way of preserving the lemon verbena flavour:

- Dissolve 225g sugar in 225ml water over a gentle heat. Chop and crush about ½ a tightly packed cup of leaves.
- Stir into the syrup and remove from the heat.
- Once cool, put into the fridge overnight to extract maximum flavour.
- Strain before using in summer drinks and cocktails.

If you make a larger batch of this syrup it can be stored in the freezer in small jars to use in the winter.

A 'Pesto' of lemon verbena leaves ground up with sugar is another excellent way of preserving the flavours:

- It is easiest to measure by volume so add 1 cup of leaves with 2 cups of sugar to a food processor and chop until the leaves are reduced to small grains.
- The resulting paste can be kept in the fridge for up to a week, or frozen for long term use.

The flavoured sugar paste can be used in ice-cream and sorbet recipes, make plenty as it is an excellent way of preserving the lemony flavour for the winter months when the fresh leaves are no longer available.

Most of the recipes which you will find for using lemon verbena are for drinks or desserts.

Lemon verbena marinated salmon

325ml boiling water
100g salt
100g white sugar
3 tbs roughly chopped lemon verbena leaves
500g salmon fillet pieces
1 tbs olive oil

In a bowl dissolve the salt and sugar in the boiling water, stir in the lemon verbena leaves and allow to cool completely.

Choose a flat dish just large enough to hold the fillets of salmon in a single layer.

Arrange the salmon skin side uppermost in the bottom and pour over the marinade.

Refrigerate whilst the salmon marinates, allow 30 – 40 minutes for thin fillets — the tail end, and 50 – 60 minutes for the marinade to penetrate a thicker fillet.

Rinse and dry the salmon, brush with the olive oil, and either grill or fry.