

# Growing Lemongrass

*Cymbopogon citratus*

## The plant

Lemongrass is a popular flavouring in Indo-Chinese cookery, and is prized for the long fragrant leaves, often drunk as an infusion as well as the more strongly aromatic leafbases or culms, which are used to add a powerful sweet lemon flavour to both sweet and savoury dishes.

## Varieties and plant material

There are two different species in cultivation - *Cymbopogon citratus* and more rarely *C. flexuosus*, mostly grown in Kerala and South India. This is usually cultivated for local markets and is rarely seen in the UK.

*C. citratus* grows to about 1m/3ft tall and is hardy to about 7°C/45°F. Plants are relatively easy to grow in the UK during summer, provided it has a sunny position and good drainage.

## Planting and Site

Lemongrass can be grown from seed (which is available from several commercial seed companies), or vegetatively propagated from fresh culms sold for food.

Growing from seeds can be tricky: sow during early spring in small pots at 13-18°C/55-64°F, we found germination can be erratic, taking a few days or many months.

Propagating vegetatively is easier than growing from seed. Select a vibrantly fresh bunch from a local Asian grocer. Check that you are buying a stem with a base plate and not just a bunch of rolled up leaves! Shave a tiny slice from the end of each stem using a very sharp knife. Insert the cut end into gritty compost and cover with a sawn-off plastic bottle top or put in a propagator. Keep the cuttings in light at 65-70°F for up to 3 weeks when new growth should be apparent. Bottom heat is very useful but not vital. If you have access to a propagator you will be able to propagate



*Rooted lemongrass cutting*



the culms in February, otherwise you will probably gain best results from waiting until April. Pot plants on as needed. A mature plant will need a pot of at least 30cm/12in diameter and be happier in a larger one.

The leaves have quite rough, sharp edges so be careful about placing it – it's not ideal for a position right next to a path or a windowsill with silky or fine textured curtains.

Lemongrass is hardy to about 7°C/45°F, so can be planted outside during summer in the same sort of site, as you would grow tomatoes. Lemongrass prefers a rich but free draining soil in full sun to produce the largest clumps. Water plants during prolonged dry spells for heaviest crops.

## Pests, weeds and diseases

The high levels of essential oil in lemongrass protect it from most pests and diseases. Snails sometimes hide in the tightly folded inner leaves of mature plants, so careful searching may be needed if your plants look chewed.

## Harvesting and storage

Once the plants are large enough you can snip off leaves and stems as required, but by late August to early September it's time to harvest.

Dig up the clump and separate a small offset to grow on a windowsill over winter; and then remove the roots and long leaves from the rest before processing.

Fresh lemongrass won't keep well and loses its perfume if dried, so if you have a large harvest, put it in the freezer or blend a few culms to a paste with chillies, ginger and garlic



for a fresh Thai-style flavouring which will store for about 10 days in the fridge.

The long leaves can be used to make a refreshing tea or sorbet or used diluted as a bath infusion. (Bathing in the extract is claimed to have beneficial effects on the skin, improving peripheral circulation and promoting a general feeling of well being.) Drinking hot tea made from lemongrass leaves combined with ginger just before going to bed in order to promote sweating is a traditional Caribbean remedy for feverish colds and flu, hence the alternative name of fevergrass.

### Seed saving

Lemongrass grown in the UK rarely flowers when grown from culms: so there is very little chance of saving any seed. The plants are daylength sensitive.

Clumps can easily be split and propagated vegetatively repeatedly over many years without deterioration.

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