

Ask the Gardener

If you have a questions for the Garden Experts of the Men's Garden Club of Villa Park, just complete the comment or questions box on our "Contact Us" button on the Web site and we will do our best to find a local expert to answer your question.

<http://www.homegardening.org>

Q: I want to expand my culinary herb garden with plants that will lend an exotic flavor in the kitchen. Which herbs do you recommend?

A: For herbs that excite the senses with a taste of the exotic, try lemongrass, lemon verbena, and pineapple sage. Look for plants at select farmers' markets, garden centers, specialty catalogs, and on-line stores or at the Club's Plant Sale Coming up on May 8 and 9, 2015.

With the exception of **lemongrass**, these tropical-tasting herbs benefit from an occasional to frequent pruning of branch tips—in other words, snipping of fresh sprigs—to encourage more leaf production. In our area they are grown as annuals as they cannot last through an Illinois Winter, but they will thrive in containers. You can overwinter them as potted plants indoors.

This decorative grass with lime-green to bluish-green stalks will grow 12 inches to 2 feet in a container and maybe as tall as 3 feet in the ground.



Growing conditions: Best grown in full sun and rich, well-drained soil with ample moisture. Zone 9 is its natural habitat so as long as you grow it with the expectation that it will die come winter you will not be disappointed and will be able to enjoy its lemon scented foliage in tea and cooking.

Culinary tips: The tough outer leaves lend a citrusy flavor to broths, soups and stews—just remove them before serving. Chop or mince the tender inner stalks and plump white bases and add to curries, stir-fries, salads, chicken, poultry or seafood dishes. All the leaves young and old make a lightly flavored lemon tea that is high in antioxidants.

Perhaps no other herb can appease the true lemon lover like **lemon verbena** can. This deciduous woody shrub to bushy, tender perennial grows 3 to 5 feet in cooler climates like ours and is a great container plant. In its natural habitat it can get 10 to 15 feet tall in frost-free regions of Mexico and Central America.

Growing conditions: Prefers rich and moderately moist, well-drained soil in full sun. When you bring it in come fall, like all trees it will lose its leaves, but keep watering it and you will be rewarded with fresh growth indoors come February. Cut it often to generate a branching habit and more of the tasty leaves.



Culinary tips: Use fresh or dried leaves in teas and beverages; salads and fruit dishes; salad dressings and marinades; and baked goods and desserts. Lemon verbena brightens the flavor of fish and chicken. It is popular in potpourri also as leaves hold their lemon scent for a long time. Pluck the leaves regularly and dry on paper towels.



Pineapple Sage is a mostly herbaceous subshrub growing from 3 to 5 feet tall and features brilliant green, slightly hairy pineapple-scented leaves and red, trumpet-shaped flower spikes from late summer until frost.

Growing conditions: Plants thrive in full sun and rich, well drained soil, but appreciate some shade in hot summer areas. Pineapple sage prefers more moisture and nitrogen than most other species of sage. Forgetting to water it in the hot summer will cause a setback and may cause the plant to drop most or all of its leaves. Native to Zone 9, it can be grown in containers and in the ground here in Zone 5, but unless you take cuttings or bring the plant indoors for winter it will not come back next year.

Culinary tips: Use fresh or dried leaves with foods that are enhanced by the light tropical flavor of pineapple, such as fruit salads, jams and jellies — or to heighten the flavor of cheeses and desserts. The amazing flowers brighten a fall arrangement and dry well for use in potpourri or pressed flower decorations.



Marcy Lautanen-Raleigh, Herb Gardener and member of the Men's Garden Club of Villa Park answered this question.