

Parsley, sage, rosemary and...papaloquelite?

Gardeners Try Less-Common Herbs

Gardeners are venturing beyond the herbal A-list to B-listers like lovage, lemon balm, chocolate mint and the Mexican herb also known as papalo. These less-common herbs have been quietly admired by gardeners and chefs as versatile seasonings. Now, more consumers are experimenting with them at home.

Among home gardeners, herbs are growing like a patch of lemon thyme run wild. Consumers are doing the math. A 0.75-ounce package of sage, mint or dill at a Whole Foods supermarket in Silver Spring, Md., runs \$2.99, while a plant at DeBaggio's Herb Farm and Nursery in Chantilly, Va., costs \$3.29 and may produce multiples of that amount for months or even years to come.



Lexey Swall for The Wall Street Journal

Chervil: A spring herb whose anise-like notes accent potato salads and fish.

says sales are up 65% from last year. Sustainable Seed Co., of Covelo, Calif., says it sells three times more of its \$16 herb "collection" packets—which include greatest hits such as thyme and

oregano—than any other collection. The popularity of herbs has led the company to test other unique types, such as licorice, which it hopes to include in future packets.

Herbs are a "gateway drug" for gardening, says Susan McCoy, president of Garden Media Group, a Kennett Square, Pa., public-relations firm that represents horticultural companies. "A lot of people—young people in particular—get hooked on gardening through herbs." They're easy to grow, don't require a lot of real estate (sometimes just a window sill) and a little goes a long way in the kitchen. Just a few leaves—rather than bulky armfuls of harvest—may be all that's needed to add some zing to a meal.

Beverage manufacturers have taken note and are introducing flavors that may have once given some consumers pause. Broccoli Cilantro, Tomato Mint and Spinach Chive are featured in a new line of "savory teas" unveiled in recent weeks by Numi Organic Tea of Oakland, Calif. (A box of 12 tea bags sells for \$7.99). Ayala's Herbal Water comes in flavors such as Cloves Cardamom Cinnamon and Lemon Verbena Geranium. (A 16-ounce bottle sells for \$1.49 to \$1.79.)

"There's a wave of interest in new herbs, dark greens and ethnic spices," says Ahmed Rahim, Numi's 44-year-old co-founder.

Carrot Curry "doesn't work" while Broccoli Cilantro is "delicious," said Claire Colton, a 41-year old stay-at-home mom who lives in Austin, Texas, after having tasted both.

Herb growers say homemade versions of such drinks are easy to make—at a fraction of the price, over time, from plants that will continue to produce abundantly.

Jim Long, an herb gardener in Blue Eye, Mo., says he couldn't live without lemon balm for his beverages. He takes two handfuls of "nice, tasty, fresh leaves" the size of a dishcloth "all wadded up" and wrings them a few times to release flavor from the leaves. He places the leaves at the bottom of a pitcher, fills it with ice, then water and lets it sit for 10 to 15 minutes to make a refreshing flavored water that he says is "radically different" from any dried-herb concoction.

Mr. Long, who owns Long Creek Herbs, an online catalog of herbal formulas and books, has a quarter-acre herb garden divided into sections according to use—culinary, medicinal and historical. One favorite of his is Thai basil, which has purple stems and flowers, as well as smaller leaves than the better-known Italian variety.

One of his summer recipes involves cutting a bunch of sprigs 6 to 8 inches long, wetting them and laying them on the barbecue grill. He covers the leaves with shrimp, which steam for a couple minutes until turning pink. He then flips them for another minute or so. The Thai basil flavor is absorbed into the shrimp.

Pam Fuller, a retired small-business owner in Mullica Hill, N.J., says she has significantly edited her herb garden in recent years to about 20 go-to herbs from, at one time, more than 100. They are arranged in two U-shaped beds bisected by a path from the kitchen deck. Lovage is one of her all-time favorites—not typically found in supermarkets or most gardens—which she uses often in soups and stews. Its leaves have a strong celery flavor.

She also likes chocolate mint, which is technically a peppermint plant whose leaves happen to smell of chocolate. She keeps sprigs in her coffee tin, which infuse her grounds with a "Girl Scout cookie" aroma.

New gardeners looking to start an herb garden don't need very much space: A 3-by-6-foot rectangle may be enough to grow a dozen varieties. The Herb Society of America, a Kirtland, Ohio-based group, offers classes on how to put together a "teapot container," a customized mix of plants whose leaves and flowers can be added to a teapot for homemade herbal tea. One container might include chamomile, lemon verbena, mint and stevia for a little sweetness. This is great for people with a balcony and no backyard, says Herb Society educator Karen Kennedy.

Papalo is a favorite of U.S. Botanic Garden Executive Director Holly Shimizu, who grows this and about 40 other herbs in large black bins on a 12-by-25-foot area on her rooftop at home in Glen Echo, Md.

In the summer, she chops papalo up for homemade salsas and says it tastes like "cilantro on steroids." And it lives longer—cilantro tends to quickly flower in hot summer months, causing the leaves to lose their punch.

Mint, on the other hand, requires moisture. Its roots can also be extremely aggressive and take over the garden, which is why gardeners should consider keeping it away from other plants in the ground. Francesco DeBaggio, owner of DeBaggio's Herb Farm and Nursery, suggests growing mint in containers on a concrete slab. Roots "can go over the edge of the pot or come out of the little drainage holes," he says.

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Emma Jackson, a gardener in Silver Spring, Md., is growing herbs for the first time this year, starting with a few seed packets in her new community-garden plot near her home. Basil, thyme, dill and other usual suspects are on her list. But she's also trying salsify—a plant with a history of medicinal use by Native Americans, says Ms. Kennedy of the Herb Society. "I hear that 100 years ago people used to eat the flowers," Ms. Jackson says.

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