



Lemon Verbena

For fragrance in the garden, lemon verbena can hardly be beaten. Botanically named *Aloysia triphylla* or alternatively *Aloysia citriodora* – the *citriodora* indicates it has lemon scented leaves, the plant is evergreen in tropical locations, but is sensitive to frost, losing leaves at temperatures below 0 °C, although the wood is hardy to -10 °C. The long, glossy, pointed leaves are slightly rough to the touch and emit a strong lemon scent when bruised. In our mountains, the plant grows well in a warm, sheltered spot, reaching up to 2 metres high, and then can become straggly. Pruning is recommended in spring by nipping out the top shoots to encourage bushing out. In summer the mauve and white flowerets appear clustered in small plumes at the end of green leafy branches, as winter approaches, the leaves begin to turn yellow and drop, by midwinter the branches are quite bare. Propagation is from about 15cm long, pencil thick hard wood cutting, plant in a warm and sheltered position, as the plant is only mildly frost hardy, where the winter is severe, protect the roots with a mulch of leaf mould or grass cuttings, or if grown in a pot, bring it inside. New growth can appear very late so never discard a plant until late summer.

Native to the warmer parts of western South America and brought to Europe in the 17th century by the Spanish, where the plant was mainly grown in greenhouses and cultivated for its oil which was steam-distilled from the leaves; soon its popularity as essential in a fragrant bouquet increased over the following century. Apparently, women would tuck lemon verbena leaves into their handkerchiefs to get relief from the summer heat by inhaling the citrus smell. A bit of trivia: during the lockdown, feeling quite nostalgic, I re-read ‘Gone with the wind’, borrowed from the library, came across Scarlett O’Hara ‘thrilled to the faint fragrance of lemon verbena sachet that came from her mother’s rustling silk dress’.

Nowadays, due to its many culinary uses, lemon verbena is widely listed and marketed as a plant for the herb garden. Its lemon scented leaves can be used to flavour sweet and savoury dishes, adding a lemon flavour to fish and poultry dishes, vegetable marinades, salad dressings, a lemon tang to fruit drinks and fruit salads. The leaves can also be used as an ingredient in alcoholic beverages and herbal teas. Lemon verbena tea makes a very comforting and refreshing drink taken warm or iced with the addition of a fresh mint. At banquets, use the leaves to scent the water in finger bowls.



A refreshing cup of fresh verbena tea

Lemon verbena is probably the ‘lemoniest’ of all lemon foliage herbs. Its fragrance delights our sense of smell, hence is popular in flower arrangements and bouquets, where the entire stems are often used. A fresh lemon verbena bouquet will fill the room with a clean sweet fragrance, why not keeping one on the kitchen bench and another in the bathroom? In the garden, locate it where leaves can be conveniently picked, crushed and sniffed, by a pathway so passers-by get that wonderful lemon scent when the leaves are brushed.

Commercially, essential oil from the leaves is used in perfumery, soap and bath essences, fresh leaves are sometimes sold as a perfumed body rub after bathing.

Lemon verbena is often confused with *Verbena officinalis* – known as vervain or common verbena, also known as herb of the cross – which is a perennial herb belonging to the *Verbenaceae* family and has lobed, toothed leaves, pale-purple flowers, which may also be white, pink, and borne in dense spikes. This confusion arises from the fact that lemon verbena is called ‘verveine’ in France, its oil was once very popular in perfumery especially in the citrus cologne ‘eau de verveine’.

Vervain or common verbena is used in herbal medicine to treat infections and to promote milk production in nursing mothers, it is also considered helpful in treating tension, depression and nervous exhaustion. Vervain has long been associated with divine and other supernatural forces. In the early Christian era, folk legend has it that the herb was used to staunch Jesus’ wounds after his removal from the cross, consequently it was called holy herb or herb of the cross.



Vervain or common verbena or holy herb, herb of the cross