

Unusual Herbs

Fresh herbs add depth of flavor to food. We're all familiar with parsley, sage, rosemary and dill. But there are many less-common herbs you can grow to add some new flavor to your life.

A favorite is *Stevia rebaudiana*. You are likely familiar with the sugar substitute Stevia, a refined version of this plant. The leaves alone are quite sweet and can be added to drinks and desserts to contribute sugar-free sweetness. Stevia is a perennial and will overwinter. It does not like soggy soil so make sure the soil drains well and dries out between watering. The leaves can be eaten fresh or dried for future use.

For a decorative and edible addition to your garden, try the annual *Perilla frutescens*. Commonly known as shiso, it can be found in red and green varieties. The leaves are wide and attractive, somewhat resembling Coleus.

P. frutescens grows well in full sun and likes moist, well-draining soil. It has a mild flavor and can be used raw as a garnish. Shiso has recently experienced a boost in popularity in the United States, and one can find dozens of recipes using it.

For a bit more zing, try *Dysphania ambrosioides*, an annual known in the Mexican kitchen as epazote. It is native to Central America. Epazote is a leafy green with a flavor often described as pungent. It can be an acquired taste, but you may find the effort worthwhile as epazote is said to reduce flatulence caused by eating beans and some vegetables. The central valley has a prime climate for this herb. It prefers heat and lots of sun, and it isn't picky about soil quality.

If your culinary options have been getting stale, I encourage you to explore the many alternative herbs out there. You are certain to find new flavors to reinvigorate your meals.

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