

Lemon Balm, *Melissa officinalis*



Lemon balm is an herb in the mint family.

a yellowish or pinkish tinge, bloom in the leaf axils throughout the summer and are attractive to bees. Because balm is rich in nectar, it is sometimes planted to feed bees.

A few cultivars are available for ornamental use. 'All Gold' is a selection with yellow leaves that develops the best color in partial shade. The variety 'Lime' has a distinct lime aroma instead of lemon. 'Variegata' has dark green leaves with golden yellow markings along the margins, but this fades with the heat of summer and when the plant flowers.

The International Herb Association has designated lemon balm (*Melissa officinalis*) Herb of the Year 2007. This perennial in the mint family is native to mountainous areas of southern Europe and northern Africa, but has naturalized in almost in every warm or temperate area around the globe. The bright green, crinkled leaves have a fragrant lemon-like odor. It is not related to beebalm (*Monarda* spp.), with which it is sometimes confused.

The plants grow about two feet tall, with branching stems. The oval or heart-shaped, slightly toothed leaves are held tightly in pairs at each stem joint. The inconspicuous white flowers, sometimes with



The white tiny flowers are fairly inconspicuous.

Grow lemon balm in full sun in fertile, well-drained soil. It can be started from seed sown indoors about 4-6 weeks before last frost, although seeds may be slow to germinate if not stratified. Transplanting seedlings into the garden when they are 2-3" tall. Space the plants 16-18" apart. Or sow outdoors in fall or late spring. Plants grow quickly to form large clumps. They may spread somewhat aggressively in some situations, and will often self-seed, so deadheading after flowering is recommended to prevent nuisance seedlings. Cutting back hard after flowering will produce a fresh flush of leaves.

Lemon balm can also be propagated by dividing old clumps in spring or early fall, or from cuttings. Replace the plants (if they have lived) after 3-4 seasons, as they generally decline at this time. It may be grown as an annual in areas where it does not survive the winter. Although it is supposedly hardy in zones 4-10, I have lost plants many winters in my garden on the edge of zones 4 and 5.



Lemon balm in flower.

This plant has few insect or disease problems (occasionally it will get powdery mildew), and is rarely, if ever, eaten by deer or rabbits.

To harvest, cut several inches of top growth off the plants at flowering during the first year. On established plants, two or three cuttings may be made in a season. The leaves may be used fresh or dried, although the dried leaves lose much of their aroma. Spread the cuttings on screens in a dark, airy room to dry. Once dry, the leaves can be easily removed from the stems and stored in closed containers.

As a medicinal plant, lemon balm has been used for reducing fever; against stomach ailments, headaches, influenza and toothaches; for easing the pain of gout; cleansing sores; and as a sedative. The essential oils in the leaves help relieve tension and stress, while a tea prepared from the leaves may ease digestive disturbances and is said to be cooling for feverish patients. The oil has also been shown to have antiviral, antibacterial, and antispasmodic activity.



Lemon balm has been used medicinally for centuries.

Steep fresh or dried leaves in hot water for a delicate aromatic drink, or add a few leaves to tea for a lemony flavor. (The fresh leaves make better tea than the dry.) It is also quite good as an iced tea in the summer, particularly with the addition of a little sugar and finely grated lemon peel. Chopped fresh leaves or whole tender sprigs can be added to fruit or green salads. They can also be used in salad dressings, sauces, soups, desserts, and confections, or with fish or poultry. Some suggest using chopped leaves in any dish containing lemon juice for a more intensive lemon aroma. You could even try a pesto made of lemon balm leaves instead of basil. Dried leaves are often used in potpourris.

– Susan Mahr, *University of Wisconsin - Madison*

Additional Information:

■ *Melissa officinalis* – on Floridata.com at www.floridata.com/Plants/Lamiaceae/Melissa%20officinalis/952