

Asian Herbs

By Carol Harvie Yamaguchi

Along with those first warm days of summer comes the yearning to pick handfuls of fresh herbs from the patio or garden. This summer, rather than focus on traditional favourites – oregano, basil, rosemary, parsley – try being a little more adventurous and innovative. Asian herbs are aromatic, pungent, refreshing and interesting. They can be substituted for many of our traditional herbs in such recipes as pesto, gremolata, herb butters, salad dressings, salsas, soups, marinades, scented vinegars and oils, flavoured teas and liqueurs. Countless recipes from different cuisines can be adapted to create unusual and appetising new flavours.

Herbs are used gracefully in Japanese cuisine. Some of the most common Japanese herbs are shiso, chrysanthemum leaves, mitsuba, kaiware, and sansho. **Shiso** consists of large aromatic leaves, either purple or green in colour, that have a distinctive scent and flavour. When served raw with sushi or sashimi, shiso is said to prevent food poisoning because of its antiseptic qualities. Other medicinal tendencies include anti-inflammatory powers with illnesses such as allergies, colds, and arthritis. Otherwise, shiso leaves are used with pickled plums or in tempura and soups. Try adding this lovely herb to salads, sandwiches, or in sauces such as pesto or gremolata. **Mitsuba** is a flavourful type of parsley with a crispy texture and a refreshing scent. Added as a garnish to savory custard dishes, soups, and sashimi, it is also used whole in tempura or salads. Mitsuba can be used whenever a stronger tasting parsley is needed. **Kaiware** is a type of radish sprout with a hot peppery flavour like watercress. Useful as a spicy garnish, it is excellent in sandwiches, stirfries, and sushi. **Sansho** is a pretty herb with a dainty balanced design that is a good seasoning for soups and fish dishes, in particular eel specialties. With its refreshing mint like flavour, sansho is a popular flavour enhancer in Japan. Although somewhat bitter in taste, **chrysanthemum leaves** are often added to hot pot dishes and stirfries. The flowers are infused to make a celebratory herbal tea served on special occasions like weddings.

In Thailand, herbs such as lemon grass, kaffir lime leaves, Thai basil, and cilantro are used in abundance. With its fresh lemon flavour, **lemon grass** is greatly valued in fish soups, curries, sauces, marinades, drinks, liqueurs, and sweet dishes. **Kaffir lime** is another powerful herb with a lemony scent and taste. Its unusual double leaf can be used whole in soups and curries and then removed before serving, or else crumbled into stirfries and eaten. Used in combination in recipes such as Tom Yum Goong, a prawn soup specialty, these two herbs create an extraordinary aromatic taste sensation. Enliven ordinary chicken soup or bouillabaisse with these lovely lemon flavoured herbs. **Thai basil** is another fragrant herb used extensively in Thailand. Handfuls of this anise scented seasoning are used to enhance the flavours of stirfries and curries. **Coriander root**, which comes from the cilantro herb, is another popular seasoning in Thai cuisine. With a milder taste than the leaves, the root can be chopped and added to stirfries or ground into a garlic and pepper paste to season curries.

Chinese cuisine tends to use more spices than herbs. However an herb that is often used to embellish soups, fish dishes, dipping sauces, and stirfries is **cilantro**, also called Chinese parsley. With its pungent and earthy flavour, cilantro is one of the most popular herbs in the world. The delicate leaves of this herb are referred to as cilantro, while the roots and seeds of this herb are called coriander, and are used in curries and sauces in many different Asian cuisines. Another herb used in Chinese cooking is the **Chinese chive** which has a stronger spicier taste than the North American chive, and is used freshly snipped over wok recipes, egg and fish dishes, salads, and sauces. **Curry leaves** are used extensively in Southern Indian cooking. Sprigs of these heavily scented leaves are added during the cooking of curry and then removed before serving. Fragrant **mint** leaves are also used in many Indian chutneys, yogurt dishes and desserts. High in vitamins, mint is said to aid in digestion. It also has a fresh aroma that symbolizes hospitality in India so it is often used as a room freshener to welcome guests.

Traditional herbs as well as some of the more exotic Asian herbs can be found at Westham Island Farm in Ladner. Since 1916, Sharon Ellis's family has been selling a variety of organic herbs during the summer months as well as flavoured jellies and honey. Another supplier is International Herbs in Surrey which offers certified organic herbs, salad greens, and baby vegetables.

Gremolata

(a classic condiment for Osso Bucco)

2 ½ tbsp finely chopped fresh parsley

2 ½ tsp grated lemon zest

1 tsp finely chopped garlic

Japanese variation, use:

fresh shiso leaves

uso zest (Japanese citrus)

finely grated ginger and garlic

Thai variation, use:

fresh cilantro leaves

lime zest

finely grated garlic