



Focus on Food

REFRESHING & HEALTHY: Chilled Herbal Beverages

by Maria Noël Groves, Clinical Herbalist & Co-op Wellness Educator

On a hot, summer day, look no further than your herb garden for a refreshing drink. This time of year, I head to the garden at least a few times a day for a sprig or two to add to my glass.

Delicious, inexpensive, and calorie-free soda is as simple as a bottle of cold seltzer water. My husband and I drink seltzer so much that we use a soda maker from the local kitchen store, but you can start with a bottle plain seltzer or effervescent mineral water from the Co-op's water aisle. Pour off a little from the top of the bottle and slowly add about three sprigs of fresh herbs, rubbing each with your fingertips before you add them to release their flavor. (It will fizz as you add them.) Cover and let it sit for about 20 minutes in the fridge or cooler before serving. My favorite simple herb sodas include fennel fronds, apple mint, spearmint, peppermint, chocolate mint, lemon verbena, lemon balm, or fragrant heirloom rosebuds. Some of my favorite combos include fresh lime with spearmint or lemon balm with lemon verbena. Experiment with the herbs you have on hand and the flavors that you like. For a little sweetness, add one leaf of fresh stevia or a couple drops of stevia extract. (Of course, liquid sweeteners like maple syrup, agave, or honey could also be used.) Perfect for a day of gardening in the hot sun!

Iced tea is a classic for summertime. You can make iced tea in a variety of ways depending on what's most convenient for you. One easy way is to make a cup of regular tea (steep one teaspoon to a tablespoon dry or handful fresh herbs in two cups boiling water for five to 15 minutes, then strain), and then refrigerate it for a few hours. For faster iced tea, make a double-strength hot tea and then pour it over ice cubes. If you want to add sweetener, it will dissolve better when added to the hot tea before it's chilled. You can't get any better than green or black tea with lemon wedges and perhaps some sugar.

However, you can also raid your herb garden

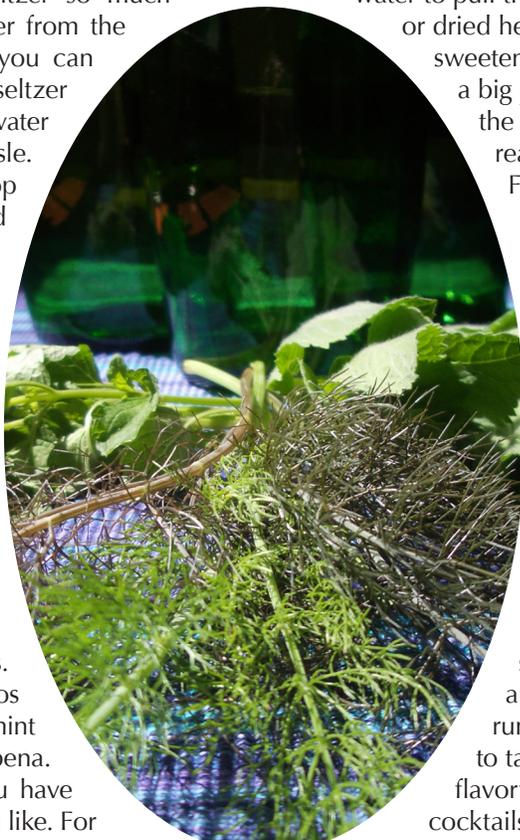
or our produce section for delicious combinations. For example, I love to combine all the licorice-y, lemon-y, or mint-y herbs I have in my garden. Use about one fistful of fresh herb sprigs per 16 ounces of water. You may have to try a few batches to find the concentration of flavor and sweetness that you like.

Sun teas rely on the heat of the sun rather than boiling water to pull the flavor out of tea bags or fresh or dried herbs. Combine the herbs, tea bags, sweetener, and/or sliced fruit with water in a big jug and let it sit for a few hours in the sun at the height of day. When it's ready, pour it off into a glass of ice.

Fresh produce and herbs combine well here: green or black tea with lemons, mint and limes, strawberries and mint or parsley, cucumbers and mint, blackberries and basil. Dried hibiscus flowers from our bulk department make an amazing tart red tea that Mexicans and Jamaicans drink cold to help cool off the body. (If it's too sour for you, sugar perks up the flavor.)

I reserve herbal cocktails for special dinners and celebrations. The best-known herbal summer cocktail is a mojito: muddle fresh spearmint or apple mint with sugar and ice, add seltzer and light mojito rum or vodka and fresh lime juice to taste. However, you can use other flavorful herbs to bring new light to classic cocktails. For example, lemon verbena or rosemary in a martini, tarragon in a cosmo, basil in your bloody Mary, lovage stems as a bloody Mary straw. Herbs are generally added to cocktails in one of two ways. Either muddle or shake the fresh leaves with ice before adding the rest of the ingredients, or make an herb-infused simple syrup. Simmer two cups of sugar with one cup of water until the sugar is dissolved. Remove from heat and add one tablespoon of dry herbs or a small handful of fresh herbs. Cover and let sit until the syrup is cool, strain. Add simple syrup to sweeten and flavor cocktails. They can be refrigerated for up to one week or frozen as ice cubes for up to one month.

One of the best ways to keep a cold beverage handy throughout the day is to put it in a thermos with an ice cube or two. It stays cold all day and won't sweat all over your desk or travel bag. ■



For more recipes, visit www.wintergreenbotanicals.com. Photos of lemon balm, fennel, and apple mint soda by Maria Noël Groves.