

# Grow Herbs, Feel Better

These five herbs may boost your brain health, alleviate aches, even help you sleep—and they're easy to grow.

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At the end of most days, 81-year-old botanist Jim Duke pours himself a cocktail. Hardly a Scotch on the rocks, this healthy concoction he's aptly dubbed Creme d'Mentia is a blend of herbs, steeped in diluted vodka, that are thought to boost relaxation, mood, memory,

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and overall brain health (see recipe below). “It lifts my spirits and lowers my anxiety,” says Duke, who worked for the U.S. Department of Agriculture for 30 years and is the author of *The Green Pharmacy* book series.

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Wild herbs were used as healing remedies long before records were kept—Otzi, the 5,300-year-old Iceman found in the Alps in 1991, had medicinal mushrooms among his personal effects—and they’ve been an integral part of Eastern medicine for centuries. Today modern medicine is beginning to realize that herbs may ease the symptoms of many ailments, from the common cold to arthritis, because they contain important health-promoting compounds such as antioxidants and anti-inflammatories.

Growing your own herbs is easy and fun, and the fresh leaves are more potent than dried ones. All you need are some pots, soil, and a sunny spot (see “How to Get Started,” below). We’ve collected five gentle but effective herbs that are ideal for amateur gardeners—they’re simple to grow and will thrive in just about any environment. Better yet, they have few side effects when consumed in small amounts, and you can take them with most pharmaceutical or over-the-counter drugs. If you’re on blood thinners or have a serious condition, consult your doctor first.

## Peppermint

First cultivated near London in 1750, peppermint has been shown to be an effective remedy for indigestion. “It calms the muscles of the digestive tract to alleviate intestinal gas and cramping,” says Tieraona Low Dog, M.D., director of the Arizona Center for Integrative Medicine in Tucson. A cup of warm peppermint tea may also thin mucus, loosen phlegm, and soothe sore throats. Apply it topically to take the itch out of bug bites or to ease muscle cramps, arthritis, and headaches.

## How To Get Started

Plant your herbs in a sunny spot. During the growing season, cut them back frequently to encourage growth. Keep them moist. If your local nursery doesn’t have these herbs, find them at [horizonherbs.com](http://horizonherbs.com) or [richters.com](http://richters.com).

**Growing tip:** "Snipping can begin two to three weeks after a plant is established," says Tess Delia, a garden and flower designer in Piermont, New York. "Be sure not to strip the stem bare or you'll compromise the plant."

**Health Benefits:** Settles upset stomach; eases muscle cramps

### Lemon balm

Arab doctors in the 9th and 10th centuries called lemon balm the gladdening herb and prescribed it to dispel anxiety and heart palpitations. More recently, a panel of physicians, pharmacologists, and scientists appointed by the German Ministry of Health endorsed the herb for relieving tension, anxiety, and restlessness. There's also evidence of cognitive benefits. In a small study published in *Neuropsychopharmacology*, 20 healthy young adults reported increased memory and improved mood after ingesting lemon balm. Another study found similar results among Alzheimer's patients.

**Growing tip:** Like peppermint, lemon balm is fast growing. If you plant it in your garden rather than in a pot, be sure to give it a lot of space.

**Health Benefits:** Dispels anxiety; improves mood

### Rosemary

The use of rosemary as a memory enhancer dates back at least to early Western civilization. Greek students wore garlands of rosemary around their heads, and students in Rome massaged their temples and foreheads with the herb prior to exams. According to Jim Duke, the herb can also reduce joint pain. To make a topical ointment, soak rosemary needles in almond oil for two weeks, filter, then rub the oil onto sore joints as needed.

**Growing tip:** Rosemary is best grown from a plant and performs well in a container.

**Health Benefits:** Increases memory; reduces joint pain

### Recipe: Jim Duke's Creme D'Mentia

- Mix 1/2 pint of 80-proof vodka with 1/2 pint water.
- Add 1/4 fresh lemon, 4 T. rosemary leaves, 6 T. lemon balm leaves, 4 T. peppermint leaves, and 2 T. sage leaves.
- Add sugar to taste.
- Steep for 3 days. Enjoy!

## Valerian

Used throughout history as a sedative and sleep aid, valerian gets its name from the Latin *valere*, which means "to be in good health." "Just the smell alone of the sweetly scented plant is enough to put some people out," says fourth-generation herbalist Christopher Hobbs, author of *Herbal Remedies for Dummies*. Research conducted on 16 insomniacs at Humboldt University of Berlin, in Germany, found valerian extract helped them nod off faster and improved the quality of their sleep.

**Growing tip:** When valerian is used for medicinal purposes, cut the flowers as soon as they appear (otherwise, they take energy from the leaves). Opt for the *Valeriana officinalis* variety, which can be used medicinally.

**Health Benefits:** Acts as sleep aid; has sedative effects

## Sage

Research conducted at the Allergy Clinic in Landquart, Switzerland, last year found that sage combined with echinacea was as effective as the painkiller lidocaine in relieving sore throat pain. Plus, studies show that the herb's bacteria-fighting heft makes it a potent breath freshener. To make sage mouthwash, steep 1 tablespoon sage leaves in 1 cup of hot water for 5 minutes. Strain and gargle.

**Growing tip:** Sage is best started from a plant, because it can take up to a year to establish itself. The best medicinal variety is *Salvia officinalis*.

**Health Benefits:** Eases sore throats; freshens breath

## To Make a Tea With These Herbs

Pour one cup boiling water over six leaves (for valerian, use 2 T. chopped root). Steep for five minutes, strain and sip.