

Asian Herbs

By Trang Triff

Many interesting herbs have both culinary and medicinal uses in the Asian kitchen. I would like to share five herbs in particular that are quite popular in the Vietnamese culture: **cilantro (coriander), lemongrass, Thai basil, Japanese ginger and Vietnamese cilantro**. Most of these herbs are available in oriental markets, particularly in larger New England cities like Portland or Boston.

Cilantro (*Coriandrum sativum*), a self-sowing annual, is a staple in any Vietnamese household. From the leaves to the root to the seeds, most of the cilantro plant is useful. For example, cilantro leaves are delicious in a fresh rice-paper roll or as a garnish in soups. Add the scraped and grounded roots in Thai Curry and in marinades for grilled meats. Cilantro seeds, also known as coriander, are a great addition to baked goods, liqueurs, curry powder, confectionery and potpourris. Beyond the kitchen, Asian families are known to use cilantro seeds to improve digestion and as a mild sedative to relieve migraines. Its essential oil is distilled from the seeds and used in incense, perfumes, medicines, toothpaste and massage oils to relieve cramps and facial neuralgia.

Every summer I look forward to eating grilled meats seasoned with a **lemon grass** (*Cymbopogon citratus*) marinade. Lemon grass, which can reach 5 feet tall, is an annual in the northeast but grows most robustly in zones 10 and 11. Its leaves and stalks are used in curry pastes, soups and stews and in teas. In fact, lemon grass tea is used in the Asian household for reducing stuffiness, water retention, diarrhea, stomachache, headaches, fevers and the flu. The plant's essential oils are used to scent soaps and shampoos as well as improve circulation and muscle tone. The oil is known to have antiseptic properties that can treat everything from athlete's foot to acne. Ever heard of lemon grass spray? The beautifully smelling mist is thought to decrease air-borne bacteria. Don't get too carried away with this herb, though! Lemon grass is a diuretic and should be consumed in moderation.

During the winter months I love to prepare the famous Vietnamese 'pho' noodle soup which requires **basil** (*Ocimum basilicum*) and more specifically, **Thai basil** (anise-scented basil). Thai basil, a purple tinged herb, is an annual or perennial that grows in tropical climates. The plant's square stems can grow 3 feet tall and are fully fragrant. Thai basil's flowers encase the seeds and become mucilaginous when wet. Its stem tips (tender leaves) are used for spring rolls, soups, stir-fry and desserts. The essential oil is used to flavor liqueurs and to scent soaps and perfumes. Inhaling the essential oil is thought to stimulate your sense of smell or to refresh your mind. Basil can also be added to massage oils as a nerve tonic to loosen overworked muscles. If you have sensitive skin or are pregnant, avoid using basil essential oils.

Japanese Ginger (*Zingiber mioga*) is another essential herb for 'pho' noodle soup. This herb is native to Japan, where it grows in shady, moist woods. It can grow to be 3 feet tall with lance-shaped leaves that are 8-14 inches long and 2.5 inches wide. The flower buds are spikes that start out to be pink. The fragrant flowers later turn to a whitish, pale yellow color. The ginger flower bracts can be eaten raw as a relish or in soups and fried foods. You can even pickle ginger! However, the most commonly used part of ginger is the aromatic rhizome, which you can commonly find fresh, dried, preserved and pickled. Use ginger to flavor curry, desserts and cordials. Ginger mixed with tea is used to relieve flatulence, indigestion and fevers. Crystallized or infused ginger may be taken to treat nausea. Females who are pregnant may take small doses of ginger to ease morning sickness. Amazingly, one drop of the rhizome essential oil can be added to massage oil to ease muscular pain, rheumatism, lumbago and fatigue.

The fifth and last herb is my favorite, **fragrant knotweed**, also known as **Vietnamese cilantro** (*Polygonum odoratum*, syn. *Persicaria odorata*). This sprawling fragrant plant grows widely in

Southeast Asia and prefers shady, moist environments. Only about a foot tall, Vietnamese cilantro has reddish stems and roots that form freely on the nodes, making it a cinch to propagate. All parts of the plant are fragrant. The plant rarely forms a flower. The scented fresh leaves are used in salads, as a garnish or in spring rolls. My mother used Vietnamese cilantro's fresh leaves in a steamed chicken marinade that was very tasty. Its flavor is quite unique and can be described as a cross between coriander and citrus. Some even say that it has a 'soapy' flavor. Vietnamese cilantro is an essential herb that is eaten as a garnish with fertilized duck eggs and pickled in a sauerkraut-like dish. In Vietnam this herb is reputed to repress sexual desires, which is why you often find it growing in monasteries. In addition, Vietnamese cilantro is believed to relieve swelling, acne, indigestion, flatulence and stomachache.

These five herbs – cilantro, lemongrass, Thai basil, ginger and fragrant knotweed – are considered essential herbs in any Asian household. They represent the Asian culture because of their unique flavors that are used in many memorable dishes. Cooking with these herbs brings me back to my childhood, conjuring up memories of helping my mother cook 'pho' noodle soup or rolling the fresh spring rolls that filled our table as they filled our hearts.