

Jekka McVicar Q&A: Your herb questions answered

21st April 2021



Herb expert, Jekka McVicar is perhaps best known for her role as Jamie Oliver's "Queen of Herbs" where she won over viewers with her expertise and down-to-earth style. Jekka's achievements stretch well beyond TV appearances though, she's a published writer, an award-winning grower, a YouTuber and a genuine guru when it comes to herbs. So, who better to ask our burning questions from the herb garden than Jekka? This collection of questions came from readers and from the Grow Your Own team.

Jekka has recently partnered with Riverstone, to create a series of herb gardens at their soon-to-be launched communities - created for over-65s - in Fulham and Kensington. Here's what she had to say.

Q. Can I ask if Jekka can recommend something for the North East of Scotland that's a little bit different that suits coastal sandy soil? I have a cold greenhouse if it needs some shelter from the frost - From Burnie, on the Grow Your Own forum.

A. "Sandy soil can be tricky, but thankfully there are plenty of herbs that work well in coastal climates. Rock samphire (*Crithmum maritimum*), Sea kale (*Crambe maritima*), and Oyster plant (*Mertensia maritima*) are all great options. They like sandy soil and grow by the sea, so there is no fear of the salty ocean air affecting these varieties. They are also great to eat and make excellent healthy additions to salads and seafood dishes."

Q. I would like to start making my own herbal infusions (I tend to prefer these to fruit types) but am not really sure where to start - are there any particular herbs you would recommend for use in this way, and are there any that don't work so well? From Laura, Editor at Grow Your Own

A. "Herbs are an excellent alternative to more common fruit infusions. Rosemary in particular is a great option. While it is a herb that most of us are familiar with using, such as adding it to a Sunday roast, it is far more versatile than most people imagine. It works wonderfully as a refreshing drink. To create a rosemary infusion at home: simply pop some fresh rosemary cuttings, approx. 3cm long, in a mug, add boiled water, let it stand for five minutes and then drink. It is a fantastic remedy for hangovers and is a great livener to help refresh memory."

Q. Whenever I've tried to grow coriander it's run to seed immediately, but I want to harvest the leaves. I've given up! Where am I going wrong? From Babru, on the Grow Your Own forum.

A. "This is a common problem for people trying to harvest their own coriander. As a member of the carrot family, coriander has a long taproot. Therefore, a recipe for disaster when growing coriander at home is sowing the plant in a pot and then transferring to the ground when pot-bound - this causes the plant to panic and immediately run to seed. A top tip is to sow the seed where you intend to crop it, either directly into a pot the size of a tomato plant pot, or straight into the ground, in order to give the roots enough room to grow."

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Q. On the subject of coriander - I understand there are a couple of different types - some grown for seed and others for leaves. Are they interchangeable or do they vastly differ? If so, is there a variety which is good for both? From Nicos, on the Grow Your Own forum.

A. "There are several different types. The majority of nurseries and garden centres now sell a strain that is best for the amateur gardener, as it doesn't bolt too fast. However, this has a long taproot, and hates being moved once the taproot begins to grow. It is best to choose a variety which suits your level of expertise and whether you intend to replant it."

Q. I was gifted some fragrant wild garlic from a neighbour last summer - and developed a real taste for it. So I plan on growing my own supply this year. I'll be growing in a container - what conditions should I be offering it? From Blake, Deputy Editor at Grow Your Own.

A. "It is important that wild garlic is kept in partial shade, and if growing it in a pot, it is important to ensure the pot is large enough. It should be filled with soil-based compost, which mustn't be too light as it needs to retain plenty of moisture. Wild garlic will come up at this time of year and die back during the summer months. That is the time when it is best to transplant the garlic in a container and keep it in partial shade."

Q. In your opinion, what is the single most difficult herb to grow? Why was it so tricky - and was it worth it in the end? From George, writer at Grow Your Own.

A. "The most difficult herb to grow is the curry leaf (*Murraya koenigii*) – I should know, it's taken me 30 years to crack! The leaves are not grown widely in the UK and you are no longer allowed to import the seeds, so they have to be bought in oil or dried. Growing your own fresh leaves is incredibly rewarding – fresh leaves transform rice into the most delicious dish. This is the first year I will be selling curry plants raised from my own seed and I am looking forward to sharing the joys of this flavoursome leaf!"

Q. How can you grow herbs in the city? What works well? Do you have to factor in elements such as air quality and limited space? From Georgina on Facebook

A. "It is easier to grow herbs in the city than you may think. You can encounter problems if you live by a main road, but a small back garden removed from the roadside is an apt growing environment. Growing herbs in pots is also a great way to control where they go and keep them manageable. It is certainly important to factor in things like sunlight, as tall buildings can reduce exposure to sun, and it is important to be clever with use of space, such as making the most of borders and window space. I am currently cultivating a community herb garden at a collection of new retirement homes being delivered in Kensington and Fulham, by Riverstone. Offering exceptional living for the over-65s, we are creating beautiful herb beds along communal walkways for all residents and the community to enjoy. The herb gardens will also be available for residents to harvest and use for their own enjoyment. It is really uplifting to see herbs thriving in the midst of central London."

Q. Can herbs turn back the clock? What herbs help you to age well? How should you/can you incorporate them into your everyday life? From Mark on Facebook

A. "Take me for an example – I've spent years working with herbs and am still working 7 days a week! The greatest benefit of herbs is the action of gardening – physically being outside and growing plants is wonderful for health and ageing. A spot of gardening on a daily or weekly basis is enough to keep anyone active and feeling young. The herbal infusions mentioned are an easy and affordable way to reap herbal health benefits – herbs such as rosemary, cardamom, and fennel are accessible, easy to grow and are great for tackling some of the problems that come with ageing. Consuming herbs that you have grown yourself gives the added benefit of the physical activity of cultivation, so I'd really recommend getting involved in community garden initiatives such as the ones Riverstone is creating as part of its new offering."

Q. How have herbs helped you through lockdown? Can they help to boost mental health? What role do herbs play in health and medicine? From June on Facebook

A. "Herbs really have kept me sane. The physical act of growing and propagating herbs is a wonderful thing. It brings hope, as you watch a plant grow from seed to fruition. Particularly during lockdown, overseeing the community gardens at Riverstone – and my own herb farm – has given me a purpose and ensured I stayed active. I also love how versatile herbs are, as one herb can offer multiple physical and mental health benefits. For instance, lemon balm (*Melissa officinalis*) helps to relieve headaches and tension, which is something many people have suffered with during lockdown. Lemongrass (*Cymbopogon*) also works as both an antidepressant and a stomach relaxant."

Q. I've tried to grow chamomile flowers for tea for a few years. However it is bitter and unpleasant, unlike shop bought chamomile tea, which was a surprise to me. Am I doing something wrong? From 'Right Shed Fred' on the Grow Your Own forum.

A. "*Chamaemelum nobile* is naturally bitter, so if this is not to your taste, I would recommend trying *Matricaria chamomilla*, also known as German chamomile, as that is much sweeter. Chamomile infusions are really great for calming anxiety and helping to induce sleep, along with anti-inflammatory and antiseptic properties, which make it an excellent addition to a healthy lifestyle."

Q. There are lots of different types of basil. Are there any that are easier to grow than others? From 'Snoop Puss' on the Grow Your Own forum.

A. "There are masses of different kinds of basil, but a great tip for looking after any type of basil is to treat it like the most cantankerous man you know – never send it to bed wet! Lots of people make this mistake, but it is very important to water it in the morning and never at night, so that it stays hydrated during daylight hours."

*For more expert advice on the **Grow Your Own** blog, why not read [Mark Lane's top tips for getting children interested in the garden](#).*

*Follow [this link](#) for further information on **Jekka's latest partnership with Riverstone**.*

