



Picked leaves can be used fresh, or dried out. Dried leaves make a stronger tea.

When I reflect upon my work in the garden, I ask, “Am I keeping the plants in the garden alive, or is the garden keeping me alive?”

Gardeners nurture their plants by adding water, compost and nutrients, and by removing sunlight-blocking weeds. In return the plants produce abundant growth, flowers and edibles.

Oftentimes homeowners consider ornamental plants solely because they look good, are fast growing or are inexpensive... none or few redeeming qualities for life. Edible landscaping is a concept that replaces ornamental plants in the landscape with plants that produce food for humans. Planting for

wildlife is a form of edible landscaping, for the birds, bees, pollinators, small furry creatures, insects and reptiles in our midst. When we plant native plants, we are planting for wildlife.

The plants growing in our gardens tell a story. It may be as simple as the plant came with the house, or the birds planted the seeds as volunteers. When my sister Lillian comes to visit, she always brings cool and unusual plants. She brought fragrant lemongrass which is thriving, and a pomegranate tree which gifts me with delicious fruit. The Vanda orchid “Josephine” she brought came from a 100-year-old collection. Oh, the responsibility is

huge... thankfully the orchid is very happy near my pond.

Often trees are planted as a living tribute for a family member or friend who is no longer with us. In my yard, that plant is the Soursop, aka Guanabana (Annona muricata) planted for my former photography assistant Ronnie Navarro, who died from cancer. Over the course of his treatment involving chemotherapy and radiation, Ronnie would tell me what he’d learned about a natural anti-cancer alternative from the Soursop tree. Research and anecdotal accounts, not necessarily true or reliable, have shown Soursop leaves and stems consumed as a tea, and by eating the fruit, can benefit you by reducing inflammation and preventing/curing certain types of cancer. Ronnie planned on eating the fruit and drinking the tea as soon as he got out of the hospital. He never got that opportunity.

The two trees planted in Ronnie’s honor have now expanded to ten, all from seeds that sprouted near the original trees. Each week I brew a batch of fresh Soursop tea. Maybe I am fighting cancer? The use of Soursop to prevent cancer is no more crazy a concept than traditional medicine’s use of Coumadin, an anticoagulant, which is actually rat poison. If you can use rat poison as a blood thinner, then what’s so strange about having fruit to prevent cancer? The lack of human studies and clinical trials doesn’t stop me from experimenting with Soursop.

Food is medicine. The health benefits

Gardening for Life... CONTINUED - *Photos by Carol Ellis*



Carol holding a Soursop fruit. While looking up at the Soursop tree I think of Ronnie, in whose memory the trees were planted.

from growing your own allows you to pick fruits and vegetables at their peak freshness and nutrition. In the Keys (zone 11) tropical fruit trees include Avocado, Mango, Figs, Carambola, Mulberry, Pomegranate, Loquat, and Soursop. Eggplant, okra, turmeric, ginger, lemon grass, pineapples, bananas, papaya, scallions, rosemary and other herbs grow year round. It is best to choose planting locations with early morning and late afternoon sunlight, and avoid the extreme heat. Fruits and vegetables need 6-8 hours of sunlight.

You can learn a lot about the plants that grow in the Keys when speaking



with our friends and neighbors who have lived in the Caribbean Islands or Central America. Often the best and only medicines are found growing in their native landscape. Lemongrass is good for head congestion. Boil a pot of water and lemongrass for 5-10 minutes. Remove from the stove, cool until the mixture is warmish. Remove the grass. Sit in a bathtub and pour the water over the head to open sinuses. Aloe Vera calms burns, including sunburn, and helps heal wounds. A sprig of Rosemary in your water makes you smarter... well maybe not, but reading this article might!

Gardens... we nurture the plants and keep them alive, but what about the opposite? Not sure whether I am here to keep the plants alive, or they are here to extend my life. Can plants nurture our spirit as well as provide food and medicine? Truth is written on a stone in my garden: “An Hour in the Garden Puts Life’s Problems in Perspective.”

Picking Soursop leaves for tea. The new growth is preferred for the best green tea. Adding stems to the tea increases the strength of the brew.



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CAROL ELLIS has lived in South Florida her entire life and Key Largo for 40 years.

Currently a Master Gardener volunteer, Carol has a degree in Journalism from the University of Florida and is the resident photographer /artist at Ocean Reef Club.



SOURSOP TEA

- GREEN OR BROWN SOURSOP LEAVES
- 12 CUPS OF BOILING WATER
- STAINLESS STEEL POT WITH LID

- Bring the water to a boil.
- Crush the soursop leaves (2-3 LEAVES PER CUP) in your palms, then add to boiling water.
- Return to a full boil, stir, then turn down to simmer. Let simmer covered for 10 - 15 minutes or until leaves are a uniform color.
- Turn off heat. Cover with lid and let steep. Drink hot or cold
- Suggested serving is one 8 oz. cup of tea per day
- A Cran-Pomegranate juice “topper” adds sweetness



Soursop leaves and fruit. Fruit grows close to the stems all over the tree.



Soursop looks prickly, but it is not.



Green soursop leaves are submerged in simmering water to make tea. Though fresh fruit is available only in the summer, the leaves can be consumed as tea year round.