

## LEMONGRASS (*Cymbopogon citratus*)

By Master Gardener Gaius Robinson

Few things are as nice as being able to go into your garden and clip fresh herbs or pick fresh fruits or veggies. Doubly nice if the plant is not only useful in the kitchen, but pretty in your garden. Lemongrass (*Cymbopogon citratus*) provides both of these. In Sonoma's Mediterranean climate, lemongrass will flourish if you follow a few basics requirements: fast draining soil, water and sunshine. This sturdy perennial will expand your culinary skills and give you a fast growing 3- to 4-foot mass of wide green grass stalks to have as a backdrop or star in your garden. It also can be planted in pots for easy access to your kitchen.



If you cannot find a plant at your local nursery, just buy two or three stalks at your local Asian market or supermarket produce aisle. Be sure to select healthy plump stalks. Once home, put the stalks in a tall glass with 3 inches or so of water. Place the plant near a window and check the water level every couple of days. Change the water once a week and repeat with fresh water. After two or three weeks, you should see roots forming. Wait until you see three or four roots on each, and then plant in fast draining soil in a 6-inch pot. Soil such as succulent mix is perfect, or add sand or grit to your regular potting soil. Keep new plants moist, but not soggy. Morning sun is best until you see lush green sprouts out of the top of the stalk. When you see that, you can transplant it into a sunny location in your garden, or into a larger sturdy pot. You should see new vigorous stalks emerging within three months. You can start harvesting when you have more than two dozen new stalks.

Lemongrass will completely fill a large pot that is 15 inches or more in diameter in about two years depending on how often you harvest. To harvest the stalks, use a sharp knife and cut as close to the roots as you can. You may need to wear garden gloves so that the sharp edges of the green grass part doesn't slice your fingers. If you have an established plant, dividing it into smaller clumps gives you more plants. The stalks can be easily pulled out of the ground, giving you the entire stalk and roots. The most potent part of the plant is the 2-inch to 4-inch bulbous end. Much like a leek, the higher up you go, the tougher the plant tissue becomes. Once you have cut off the tenderest part, smash that part with a kitchen mallet or a clean hammer or slice according to recipe directions. You will see that the



bulbous part may be pale lavender or white, depending on the time of year.

The origin of lemongrass is the exotic lands of Southeast Asia and India. Lemongrass has been used for centuries as a medicinal herb and for perfumes. It is used profusely in dishes from Thailand. Its beautiful floral flavor has nuances of lemon and tropical breezes. The leaves and stems can be steeped to make a gentle tea. This versatile plant is used in soups, Asian curry dishes, salad dressings, exotic libations and even jams.