

Three Challenging Herbs to Grow in San Antonio

By Pat Simpson, Bexar County Master Gardener

Each plant has certain requirements for growing. A specific plant may need the soil to be alkaline or acidic; it may need full sun, shade, or partial shade; watering may need to be regular or the plant allowed to dry out between times, cool or hot temperatures may be tolerated or not... and the list goes on.

Therefore, most gardeners look for plants that are native or well-adapted to our area, to increase their chances for success. But one of my favorite aspects of gardening is to experiment! While not all of my experiments are successful, it is really gratifying when a plant not known to be especially suited to the area takes a stand and survives! I still remember my joy at successfully maintaining a peony in the semi-desert environment of San Angelo, Texas—what joy to see those beautiful blooms come back each year!

Camellia



Camellia sinensis, aka Tea Plant.
Image by [Natasha G](#) from [Pixabay](#)

Such is the case for the camellia in San Antonio. While the *Camellia japonica* (Japan) is grown for its beauty and scent, the *C. sinensis* (China) and the *C. sinensis var. assamica* (Asia/India) can be grown to make teas. A wide variety of teas can be made, including black, green, and oolong. The leaves used for tea are glossy, green and have serrated edges which look a lot like bay leaves.

While both are considered hardy to Zone 8, what makes growing camellias in San Antonio challenging is that camellias need an acidic soil and the soils in Bexar County are alkaline.

You will have better success with growing the *C. sinensis* in a container using a mix of ½ peat moss, ¼ sharp builders' sand, and

¼ compost. Shelter your plants from winds and hot afternoon sun, apply a three-inch layer of mulch and water once a week during the summer. Fertilize in the early spring and again mid-summer.

Leaves for tea are harvested by hand during the warmer months after the third year of growth. Only the top young leaves are harvested. Preparation of the leaves differs, depending on which type of tea you are producing. Store the dried tea leaves in an air-tight container.

For more information on harvesting and using *Camellia sinensis*: [Grow the Tea Plant. Peg Godwin. North Carolina University Extension.](#)

Lavender



Lavender stoechas, aka Spanish lavender.
Image by [fauning](#) from [Pixabay](#)

Another challenging herb to grow in San Antonio is lavender. Of the many species of lavender available, *Lavendulastoechas* (Spanish lavender) is probably best suited for San Antonio, although you might give *L. angustifolia* (English lavender) a try. Lavender is a woody perennial hailing from the Mediterranean area. Therefore, hot, dry weather is perfect for them.

The most challenging aspect of growing lavender in Bexar County is getting the watering correct. Excellent drainage is a must. If you want to grow it in the ground, use raised beds. I prefer to grow lavender in pots, since overwater can be a problem and I have more control in a container.

The plant can reach 1-4 feet tall at maturity, depending on the variety, so be sure to use a large enough pot! Water mature plants every two to three weeks until buds form, then once or twice weekly until you

harvest. If you mulch your plants, use gravel instead of organic material. The gravel will help to keep the stem and leaves drier so there is less chance of disease.

Prune about a third of the plant in spring, to encourage new growth. Harvest your lavender when only a few of the buds have opened. Cut your stems as long as possible and dry in cool, dark place with good circulation.

Lavender has been used as a natural insect repellent, antiseptic for burns or cuts, and in tea or sachets to relieve stress.

Tumeric



Curcuma longa, aka Tumeric
Image from easytogrowbulbs.com

Tumeric (*Curcuma longa*) is from the *Zingiberaceae* family which also includes ginger. Like ginger, you are harvesting the rhizome, which is an underground stem that looks like a fleshy root. It hails from tropical areas of Asia whose climate is nothing like what we have in Bexar County. Hence, the challenge!

Tumeric is grown from rhizomes and takes 8-10 months of growth before harvesting. Tumeric needs consistent temperatures above 65 degrees during this time, therefore you must provide protection during the cooler months. If you try growing them in the ground, keep them well mulched. Growing them in containers allows you to bring them inside during the cooler months.

Tumeric does well in containers, which will also make it easier to control not just the temperatures but also the amount of water and sunlight. In San Antonio, grow tumeric in morning sun or dappled shade to lessen the chance of sun scald.

You can purchase organic rhizomes in some grocery stores and online. Start your rhizomes indoors a month or two before you plan to transplant. Bury the rhizomes under about 2 inches of potting soil with knobs/buds turned upward. Keep the soil damp and look for growth in about a month. After transplanting, water to keep soil moist but not soaked, feed with 15-15-15 liquid fertilizer every couple of weeks. The plant requires full sun, well-drained soil and regular watering. Although mostly pest free, turmeric can develop leaf blotch, a fungal infection controlled by Bordeaux fungicide, if caught early. Aphids and mites can be a problem outdoors but easily checked with a hard spray of water or insecticidal soap. After 8-10 months, when the plant starts to turn yellow, it's time to dig up your turmeric. Cut your rhizomes away from stems, wash away soil and store for up to six months in cool dark environment. Be careful when peeling the rhizome—use gloves or accept the yellow stain on your fingers for days after!

While turmeric is best known for its use in Indian foods, the rhizome also has anti-inflammatory properties useful for mild arthritis, and as a yellow dye for fabrics.

While Camellias, Lavender, and Tumeric are not your usual, easy-care plants for San Antonio, they can be grown here. If you would like to grow these or other less-adapted plants, I recommend that you learn as much as possible about their requirements before you begin. Your ultimate success with the plant depends on providing each plant with its unique requirements. While this may seem like a lot of extra work, the reward of seeing your efforts with these special plants bear fruit is one of the joys of gardening.