

Grow your own CUPPA

Kiwis love drinking tea and coffee, but can we grow them in our own gardens? Virgil Evetts investigates

You can grow tea and coffee in many parts of New Zealand – there are even a couple of small but promising commercial ventures. But you'd be hard pressed to find anyone in your neighbourhood with a personal tea plantation or coffee patch. To grow sufficient quantities of either would be an enormous labour of love, and you'd not have room for much else.

But when it comes to gardening, mere practicality should never get in the way of a good project. Even if yields are small, growing tea and coffee is fun, and really no more outlandish than growing grapes for wine-making. Tea and coffee plants are much easier to get hold of than wine grapes, and nowhere near as disease-prone.

Tea and coffee are mainly grown in tropical regions but actually neither plant likes high temperatures. The main advantage of the tropics is a constant climate, which allows for year-round cropping, rather than the season-based approach that rules us here.

Tea (*Camellia sinensis*)

Tea is the drink that built the British Empire and through our colonial roots has remained a much-loved drink here. To produce tea, the tender new leaves of *Camellia sinensis* are dried straight away to make green tea, or after a process of fermentation to make black tea.

Tea plants are instantly recognisable as camellias. Their single-petalled, waxen flowers have an unusual subtle fragrance reminiscent of newly tilled soil. According to the experts, it's not

good practice to let the plants flower, as blooms sap energy and slow down growth, but I say it's a shame not to let a few do so to enjoy the blooms.

Tea plants prefer slightly acidic soil but aren't as fussy as azaleas or daphnes. They like plenty of humidity, and many of the best tea-growing regions are prone to heavy fog and mountain mist. Basically, if you can grow camellias, you should be able to grow tea too.

Zealong, New Zealand's first and only commercial tea growers, chose their site at Gordonton, near Hamilton, for its heavy, persistent fog in the cool months.

"Even if you get a bit of frost, it will only damage the new growth," says Jeff Howell of Zealong. "The mature leaves should be fine and the plants will bounce back once things warm up. Wherever they are though, tea plants need a bit of shelter. Even in summer, wind can burn off the new growth, which is the part you want to pick."

Picking at Zealong begins in November, 60 or so days after the first leaves emerge, and is repeated in January and March. Zealong is an organic operation, relying on blood and bone and animal manure-derivative plant food. Jeff reckons this results in slower but better-quality growth, "We've had Chinese tea industry experts here amazed by how different our tea looks, tastes and feels to what they're used to. One guy told me he thinks Zealong tea is more like the stuff produced in China aeons back, before they started using heavy-duty chemical fertilisers. He was very impressed."

To process green tea, pick the tender new leaves – preferably the top two leaves of every shoot with the emerging tip between them – and dry quickly in a food dryer or in a fan-forced oven set to about 70°C. As the leaves dry remove them periodically from the heat and roll between your hands. This helps to release flavour when you steep the tea later on.

Black tea is made via a somewhat involved process of wilting, kneading, fermenting and finally drying the tea leaves. If you're really keen to give it a go, look for instructions online.

Coffee (*Coffea arabica*)

Coffee originated in the highland rainforests of East Africa, so it dislikes direct sunlight, preferring dappled light and slightly acidic soil containing lots of organic matter. Heavy frost will kill it.

Plants have been grown successfully (meaning they've fruited) outdoors at least as far south as Gisborne. In the supposedly winterless far north, Ikarus Coffee Roasters has recently planted New Zealand's first (and probably the world's southernmost) experimental coffee plantation.

My coffee bush in Auckland has been in the ground for two years and is now about 1.5m tall. It's currently covered in small, gorgeously fragrant flowers, which with the help of my bees should give way to small clusters of the red/orange fruit known as coffee cherries, which each contain two perfect beans. The flesh of the coffee cherry is edible – a bit sweet but pretty much tasteless.

PHOTOS: ANNABELLE BREAKEY/GETTY IMAGES; LAKRUWAN WANNIARACHCHI/STRINGER/GETTY IMAGES

The new shoots of *Camellia sinensis* are picked and dried to produce both green and black tea.



From top: Ripe coffee cherries at Ikarus Coffee Roasters' Northland plantation; A homegrown caffeine hit in the making on a nine-year-old coffee tree in Roger Bodle's Gisborne garden; A scented cluster of coffee blossom on one of Ikarus' trial trees.

If you live in a frost-prone area, grow coffee as a pot plant inside. Gisborne-based backyard coffee grower Roger Bodle recommends using good-quality potting mix, possibly with extra sand or pumice, and placing a layer of pebbles between the pot and the saucer to prevent the roots sitting in water. Coffee dislikes wet feet and will quickly show its displeasure with blackened leaf tips.

Roger has had success growing coffee outside too. "They seem to start fruiting, almost like clockwork, in the third year after planting. There's no stopping them after that." Roger doesn't give his plants any special treatment: "Just some slow-release fertiliser a few times a year and plenty of water in summer. I like a plant that can hold its own."

Snails are no trouble, but coffee is popular with passion-vine hoppers and scale insects in summer. Coffee does not react well to oil-based sprays.

Get plants from the Incredible Edibles range in garden centres. Or you could

Processing coffee cherries into drinkable coffee is a wee bit involved but achievable at home.

try germinating green (unroasted) coffee beans. Green beans are available on Trade Me and direct from coffee roasters. It's important to find really fresh beans for germination, as viability diminishes rapidly after about a year.

Soak the green beans overnight in warm water in a warm spot (like the hot water cupboard or similar), and press gently into moist seed-raising mix. Cover with plastic and place in a warm spot – either on a heat pad or a sunny windowsill – until germination occurs.

This can take several weeks, but it's a great way to produce lots of plants cheaply. Coffee seedlings are susceptible to sunburn and root rot, and should be kept warm but well shaded, moist but not wet. Plant out when about 20cm tall and only during the warmer months.

Processing coffee cherries into drinkable coffee is a wee bit involved, but achievable at home. Whether you'll ever harvest enough beans to make it worth the effort is another matter.

According to pioneering Northland coffee grower Carol Schluter of Ikarus Coffee Roasters, the plants will grow well in just about anyone's frost-free garden, will flower and even produce cherries. "But there's often a problem with bean-set within the fruit. The plants need lots of heat for the beans to harden inside the cherry and become processable."

However, the people at Ikarus are working hard to produce cool-compatible cultivars and have 600 or so seedlings under trial already.

If you want to harvest homegrown beans, you'll need to squeeze the beans out of the ripe fruit (which will be red and soft) by hand and place them in a plastic bag. Seal the bag and put it in a warm place for 24 hours. During this time the tenacious and slimy seed coat will break down, making it easy to rinse away in a sieve under the tap. Shake off any excess water and spread the washed beans on a clean tea towel. Leave to dry and cure for several days.

To roast coffee you need a commercial coffee roaster, which will only set you back about \$6000 (and that's a small one!) Or you could buy a \$40 electric popcorn maker that closely matches the action of a commercial coffee roaster on a micro-scale. With practise these little machines can give excellent results. Just add small quantities of green beans to the machine and pop until they reach your preferred roast. The experts measure this on a crack scale, as in how many times the beans make a cracking noise when they expand and contract. But colour is a good indicator too.

Remove coffee beans from the heat just before they're ready because residual heat keeps them cooking for another few minutes (like nuts). Knowing when to stop is where coffee roasting becomes an art form.

A word of warning: coffee roasting is a smoky process and should only be done outdoors. Far from smelling rich and alluring as you might expect, coffee smoke is surprisingly pervasive and rank.

And you could also try...

Hibiscus tea

Rosella (*Hibiscus sabdariffa*) is a pretty, annual hibiscus. Its dark red, fleshy, dried or freshly picked calyx (sepals or bud-sheaths) are steeped in boiling water to produce a pinot-coloured, berry-scented and rather sharp drink. Although it offers nothing in the way of caffeine, rosella tea is supposedly loaded with vitamin C, and is a pleasant enough drink if you're into that sort of thing.

Northern Territory garden writer Leonie Norrington, author of the excellent *Tropical Food Gardens*, reckons rosella makes a fine liqueur too. Other uses for the fruit include jam- and wine-making. You can also preserve the whole fruit in syrup.

Rosellas need a long growing season and as much heat as they can get. Start from seed (try 'Hibiscus Jamaican Cocktail' from Kings Seeds) in August, and plant out in early October. They need no special treatment, just full sun, plenty of water in hot weather and general liquid garden fertiliser until flowering. Snails love rosellas and can cause serious damage in record time, so be vigilant whenever rain threatens.

Earl Grey tea

New Zealand's second-favourite black tea (after gumboot), Earl Grey owes its alluring fragrance to the essential oils of the bergamot orange, *Citrus bergamia*, and not the herb bergamot (*Monarda* sp.). It's commercially grown almost exclusively in Southern Italy, but it's available in New Zealand too.

All parts of the bergamot tree exude the unmistakable aroma of Earl Grey, which in its natural form is somehow richer, deeper and more complex than anything out of a tea box.

Bergamot should be managed like any other citrus – water well in hot weather, and give it plenty of nitrogen-rich fertiliser and a rough prune

in winter from time to time (summer pruning attracts citrus tree borer). Being closely related to the Seville orange, bergamot is probably quite a bit tougher than lemons or sweet oranges, although it's largely untested by gardeners here.

Bergamot's potential extends far beyond tea and it's only a matter of time before it becomes a seriously sought after ingredient. Bergamot marmalade is regarded by many as the best in the world, and by extension I have my sights set on making bergamot paste (like quince paste) this year, for eating with cheese and cured meats.

To make your own home-grown Earl Grey tea, simply steep about three bergamot leaves and/or a few strips of zest from the fruit with good black tea.

Moroccan mint tea

In officially alcohol-free Morocco (a country with a 35-million-bottles-per-year wine industry) mint tea is the drink of social situations and a standard gesture of good hospitality. With its syrupy sweetness, hot minty flavour and no-holds-barred caffeine blast, it comes pretty close to being an inebriant too. Along with great handfuls of fresh spearmint leaves (and tea of course), Moroccan mint tea often includes small quantities of fresh wormwood (*Artemisia absinthium*).

While supposedly toxic in large doses (there is some debate about this), small amounts of wormwood act as a stimulant and allegedly promote good conversation. This last bit is about as dubious as the notion of a few wines making you more interesting,

but if nothing else, a little wormwood adds a spicy fragrance and pleasingly bitter finish to mint tea. Wormwood is a readily

available perennial herb, usually grown here for its feathery, silver foliage rather than any gastronomic properties. It was once the main ingredient in the notoriously psychosis-inducing and alarmingly green liqueur, absinthe, but is safe in the small quantities used in Moroccan mint tea. If in doubt, just leave it out. Grow wormwood in a hot, well-drained spot, much like lavender. It can tolerate any amount of cold in winter but dislikes boggy, wet soil.

Moroccans prefer spearmint leaves in their mint tea, but common winter mint will do the job too. Either variety will thrive in deep, moist soil with plenty of organic matter. As with most mints, these two spread by runners and can become weedy if left to their own devices, but are easily hauled out whenever and wherever they outstay their welcome.

Make your own Moroccan mint tea

Place a tightly packed fistful of fresh mint leaves and 4 teaspoons (or teabags) of green tea into a 4-cup teapot. Add around 1 teaspoon of torn wormwood leaves (optional). Cover with boiling water. Leave for 5 minutes, then agitate the pot and pour.

Moroccan mint tea is traditionally served sweet – almost cloyingly so – and very hot. Some traditional recipes stipulate brewing the tea separately before adding the mint leaves. Serve in glass cups, if you have them, to best show off the colour of the tea. ☺

Availability

Tea and coffee plants are available in the Incredible Edibles range at garden centres. Get NZ-grown tea from Zealong Tea Estate, and bergamot from Kerikeri's Flying Dragon Citrus Nursery. All contacts on page 112.

