



Grow Roselle for Herbal Teas and More

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Cold, wintry weather has many of us reaching for that hot cup of tea. And, what a selection of flavorful teas there are from plain old black to exotic herbal concoctions. If herbal teas are to your liking, keep in mind that there are a number of plants that can be grown in your vegetable, flower or herb gardens and which can be dried or used fresh to make tasty teas. Some plants, like lemon balm and mints are tough hardy perennials here while others like the Jamaican hibiscus (*Hibiscus sabdariffa*) also known as roselle, Jamaican sorrel or Florida cranberry can be a bit more challenging to grow.

Celestial Seasonings' Zinger tea fans have probably noticed they have hibiscus listed as an ingredient. The hibiscus family is rather large and includes okra, hollyhocks, rose of Sharon, hardy perennial hibiscus as well as tropical species. Turns out that the hibiscus in these teas that gives them their distinctive flavor and red color is roselle. This large, bushy annual is not from Jamaica or Florida but rather native to Central and West Africa. It now grows in tropical regions all around the world.

Roselle grows several feet tall, just like its hardy perennial hibiscus cousin, but here in New England it would be considered a tender perennial. Just about all parts of the plant are edible including the leaves, the seeds, the fruits and the roots. Most popular for tea is the fleshy, bright red, cup-like structure at the base of the bloom, which holds the seeds and is called the calyx. This part of the plant can also be used to make jams, sauces and other drinks.



Roselle tastes like a mixture of cranberries and raspberries. In fact, it got its Florida cranberry name because they were trying to grow it commercially as a cranberry substitute in that state. While growing roselle for a cranberry alternative was not successful, it is grown in Florida, California, Louisiana and Kentucky on a large scale for herbal teas and other uses.

If you want to try your hand at growing roselle, you need to keep in mind that it does require a long growing season (100 days) so seeds would need to be started indoors in March about the same time that you start your tomato seeds. So far, I have found seeds available at [Territorial Seed Company](#), [Renee's Garden Seed](#), and at [Richters](#) although there are probably other sources. Plants are available from [Logee's Greenhouse](#) in Danielson, CT. Those trying roselle for the first time should aim for 3 to 6 plants.

Seeds need to be scarified before planting which means one needs to make a hole in the seed coat. Not being that skilled with an Exacto knife, I find it easiest to just put some seeds in between 2 pieces of coarse sandpaper and rub the sandpaper over the seeds. Plant the seeds about one-half inch deep in individual cell packs or in 2-inch pots in moistened soilless potting medium. Place the cell packs in bright light and where temperatures stay relatively warm. Once the seeds germinate and plants get their first set or two of true leaves, move them up to 4-inch pots. Keep the potting mix moist and fertilize with a half-strength liquid fertilizer.

Once the danger of frost has past, plant your roselle in a sunny, well-drained spot in your garden. Space plants about 3 feet apart. Keep the plants moist but do not overfertilize as that will result in lots of green leaves, great for salads and stir-fries, but few flowers. When plants get about a foot high, pinch them lightly to promote branching.

Roselle is a short day plant meaning that flowering will not occur until there is less than 13 hours of light each day. Expect plants to bloom in late summer through fall. The pale yellow to cream colored flowers have a dark eye and only last one day. Several days after the blossom fades, the bright red calyx will develop. Pick them when they are tender and plump. As with many vegetables and cut flowers, the more you pick, the more they will produce.

Once harvested, the calyx needs to be separated from the seeds. They can be frozen or dried in a food dehydrator or by placing on cookie sheets in a warm, well-ventilated area. Stir several times and when dry, store in an airtight container. The seeds can be saved for replanting the following year, roasted and brewed like coffee, or ground and added to soups as a source of protein. As a rule of thumb, one roselle plant may produce up to 2 pounds of fresh calyxes under optimal condition and it takes 10 pounds of fresh calyxes to make 1 pound of dry.

Not only can roselle be used to make homegrown teas and as a stir fry or salad ingredient, but the calyxes are high in calcium, vitamin C and riboflavin. Plus, the tea is considered an antioxidant and anti-inflammatory. So consider growing roselle in your gardens this year as not only is it an attractive plant but it is edible and even has some medicinal properties.

For questions about growing plants for herbal teas or other horticultural topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.