

JANUARY 2024

Herb Letter

OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE HERB SOCIETY OF AMERICA
BATON ROUGE UNIT



Monthly Meeting, January 25, 2024

6:30–8:00 p.m.

LSU AgCenter Botanic Gardens, Lone Burden Conference Center
4560 Essen Lane, Baton Rouge, LA

Herb of the Month — Blue Agave (*Agave tequilana*)

Blue agave is a succulent plant native to Mexico, particularly in the regions surrounding the city of Tequila; it has spiky, blue-green leaves that form a rosette shape, and it can take several years to mature before it is ready for harvesting. Blue agave is not typically considered a culinary herb in the traditional sense, as its primary use is associated with the production of tequila rather than as a seasoning or flavoring agent. But syrup derived from the blue agave has a lower glycemic index compared to traditional sugars, making it popular in the food industry and among consumers seeking natural sweetening options. It can be used as a sweetener in various recipes, including beverages, desserts, and baked goods. More information on p. 6. 🌿

Message from the Chair

Now that the holidays are over and we get back to business, there is a lot to be done. Yep, I don't mince words. The board met on January 3rd to recap last year, plan for this year, and plan for HSABR Herb Day! Seven of our eight garden interns for 2023 completed the requirements and learned about growing and using herbs. It was a pleasure and delight to work with these young ladies. So much energy. This is a fantastic win! The 2024 garden interns will be introduced at the January 25th meeting.

Last year we discussed creating a booklet for HSABR, but we created a brochure instead. The brochure will be updated when there is a change in executive board members.

HSABR has initiated the move to create an endowment to ensure long-term financial support for the Unit. Claudia Ross, Treasurer, has begun to research more profitable CD rates as well.

Plans for Herb Day 2024 are underway. There will be lots of plants, food trucks, vendors, and classes. We are expecting a big crowd and need our members to help! Sharon Murphy and Claudia Ross are Co-Chairs and will be sharing information at the January meeting.

HSABR has dipped its toes in the world of School Gardening. We want to teach youngsters that growing herbs is fun and easy. Students will get to touch, taste, and smell the herbs as they grow. If you are interested in participating in this endeavor, please let me know.

A benefit of your membership is access to The Herb Society of America website which is full of information for events scheduled in 2024. The Education Conference will be in Philadelphia in June this year and is open to all members. The Southeast District Conference will be in Dothan, Alabama, in October. This event is open to all members of the SE District. If you have paid your dues and are having trouble signing into the HSA website, then give them a call for assistance.

—Sylvia 

Did You Know? There's a National Herb Garden in Washington, D.C.!

The National Herb Garden—the largest designed herb garden in the United States—showcases plants that enhance people's lives as flavorings, fragrances, medicines, coloring agents, and additives in industrial products. The garden exhibits these herbal plants from places and cultures around the world in theme gardens, single-genus collections, and seasonal displays for education, research, and aesthetic enjoyment. It began as a gift to the people of the United States from the Herb Society of America and was constructed and dedicated in 1980.

Read more about the National Herb Garden on the [U.S. National Arboretum's website](#) and on the [USDA's AgResearch Magazine](#) page!

HSA Webinar: Yarrow, Herb of the Year 2024

Herb Society of America Webinar, January 30, 2024, noon Central (1:00 p.m. Eastern)
Free for HSA members, \$7.50 for non-members. [Register here.](#)

Discover how to grow, harvest and use this year's Herb of the Year—Yarrow—as selected by the International Herb Association. Janice Cox, HSA's Education Chair will present this popular herb and why it has become a garden staple for many, especially in pollinator and medicinal gardens. Throughout history this unassuming plant has been known to have great healing powers. Today it is prized for keeping other plants healthy and protecting them from disease. You will learn growing tips, how to propagate root cuttings, make a simple salad and soft cheese flavored with the peppery young leaves, and several body care products featuring fresh and dried yarrow flowers and leaves. Janice will include time at the end of this webinar for attendees to share why they love using and growing this herb. Bring growing tips, stories, and simple recipes to type in the chat and share with the group.

Janice Cox is a garden writer and natural beauty expert. She is the author of *Beautiful Flowers*, *Beautiful Lavender*, *Beautiful Luffa*, *Natural Beauty at Home*, *Natural Beauty from the Garden*, *Natural Beauty for All Seasons* and the newly released *Natural Beauty at Home Handbook*. She was the beauty editor for *Herb Quarterly Magazine* for more than twenty years. She is the Education Chair for The Herb Society of America and a member of the International Herb Association and makes her home in southern Oregon. 🌿



The Herbarist—HSA's Annual Journal

HSA members enjoy both print and digital versions of *The Herbarist* as a membership benefit. Nonmembers are welcome to browse sample articles from previous years and to review *The Herbarist* indices. If you would like full access to *The Herbarist* and its archives, we invite you to become a member of HSA! 🌿

Click to check out a sample of [The Herbarist 2022!](#)

Spilling the Tea on Sugarproof Tea

Sugarproof Tea is touted on social media as “a blend of botanicals that help kick the sugar habit.” Herbalists are naturally curious people and that statement made me wonder, “What herbs comprise this highly acclaimed ‘sugar proof’ herbal tea?” Surprisingly, only four ingredients: Gymnema, Hibiscus, cinnamon, and mint. Three of the four ingredients are well known and staples in most herbal pantries but what is Gymnema (juh-m-nee-muh)?



Gymnema sylvestre is popularly known as “gurmar” in Ayurvedic medicine, which is a Hindu term meaning “destroyer of sugar.” Using Gymnema is said to neutralize the excess sugar present in the body. The “destroyer of sugar” is a slightly bitter herb with a bold aroma similar to that of spinach. Spinach tea does not sound appealing; however, sour, and bitter flavors are known to decrease sugar cravings. The other ingredients, Hibiscus, cinnamon, and mint, are herbs that promote digestive health and have a plethora of other beneficial properties—including masking the spinach flavor.

Of course, the next question is, “How do I make my own?” Since the first ingredient of this tea is Gymnema, indicating its importance on the list, I ordered this herb. I used two parts Gymnema to one part each of Hibiscus, cinnamon, and mint. My DIY tea tastes good and is as effective as advertised!

The downside of Gymnema is that it may interact with drugs for diabetes, causing dangerously low blood sugar. Always do your own research: deep-dive to make sure you know what you are getting yourself into and check with your healthcare professional before using. If you are interested in trying this DIY, I will have limited samples at the January meeting.

—Julie Walsh 

The History and Uses of Rosemary—Research Report

By Olivia Letlow, HSABR Garden Intern, 2023

Rosmarinus officinalis, or rosemary, was the Herb Society of America’s herb of the month for November 2023. A member of the mint family, it has global significance, and is native to the Mediterranean coastline. According to the University of Wisconsin–Madison, the scientific genus name, *Rosmarinus*, comes from the Latin words *ros* and *marinus*, which translates to “dew of the sea,” referring to the dew-like sea spray found on plants growing close to the water. It can also be traced back to ancient China in 220 CE, and in the ninth century, it reached the UK, contributing to its global popularity.



Rosemary is now cultivated worldwide. It is a generally hardy plant, and can tolerate cold temperatures down to 20°F. The thick, leathery leaves resemble needles, with dark green leaves with a pale underside. It grows small flower clusters, that can be pale blue,

pink, or white. Rosemary does best in full sun and well-drained soil. It can be harvested any time, and used in a variety of ways, including fresh or dried.

The use of this herb can be traced back to ancient Egypt under the rule of King Ramesses III. There are records of the king offering 125 measures of rosemary to the god Amon at Thebes. Ancient cuneiform stone tablets dating back to 5000 BC were found mentioning rosemary and it was later documented in Egyptian burial rituals, in traditional eastern medicine, and in western scholarly contexts.

Rosemary is also a popular Christmas plant. In Spain, they call it *romero*, meaning “pilgrim plant,” stemming from a biblical story about the Virgin Mary. It is said that during her flight to Egypt, she draped her blue cloak around the bush, and the flowers turned from white to blue. It is also said that a rosemary bush should never grow taller than Jesus Christ himself, and that if it reaches the age that he died at 33, it will lie down instead of growing straight up. Many legends tie the scent of rosemary to Christmas joy and remembrance of its humble service to the Holy Family. It was later called “Rose of Mary” and later “rosemary” in honor of the Virgin Mary.

Rosemary has a significant role in European folklore. In Sicily, Sicilians believed that the blooms were used by young fairies to sleep in. In Spain and Italy, it was used as a defense against witches and harmful hexes. The etymology of rosemary is heavily tied to its history and symbolism, too. In Portugal, rosemary is known as *elegririn*, which takes its roots from the word for “elfin plant” in Scandinavia.

There is heavy symbolism tied to this fragrant herb. Even since ancient times, rosemary has been thought to improve memory. It is also seen as a symbol of fidelity and remembrance of those who have passed away. In pre-industrial England, it was traditionally tossed onto coffins at funerals to help cover up the smell of decay and death. However, this practice can be traced all the way back to ancient Egypt, where rosemary was used in the embalming process. Rosemary was also traditionally used at weddings, worn by brides as a symbol of happiness, loyalty, and love. In the Victorian era, brides carried sprigs of rosemary to symbolize carrying her memories of her old home to her new one. The Victorian meaning of rosemary was “your presence revives me,” most likely due to its notable fragrance.

Editor’s note: This is an excerpt from Olivia’s research report. The full text is available on the Newsletters and Links page of [HSABR’s website](#).

Herb of the Month: Blue Agave (*Agave tequiliana*)

From the Herb Society of America:

Facts:

- The genus *Agave* has more than 200 species. They are indigenous to Central America to northern Mexico, and some tropical areas of South America. They also grow in arid regions of the United States, up to USDA hardiness zone 6. *Agave americana* is a [2024 HSA Notable Native plant](#).
- Considered succulents, agave plant leaves grow in a rosette formation and the plant flowers after 10–30 years of growth (depending on the species). Following flowering, the primary rosette dies, leaving “pups” surrounding the base of the parent plant that continue to live.
- The flowers of various species support a diverse group of pollinators including nectivorous bats, hummingbirds, perching birds, moths, and bees.
- Agave species have had many uses over the centuries, including the sharp spine at the end of the leaf of some species that was removed with fiber from the leaf and used as a needle and thread.
- The leaf fiber has also been used to create items such as ropes, mats, sandals, and brushes.
- The stem, base, or heart of the agave plant is called the *piña* and is in the center where the leaves attach. It is carbohydrate rich. This part of the plant is roasted and used to create alcohols such as tequila and mezcal and agave syrup, and ground into edible patties. Pulque is another beverage made from the lightly fermented sap of the agave.
- Tequila is made only from *Agave tequiliana*, also known as the blue Weber agave (agave azul). Mexico has regulated tequila production, limiting it to only the Mexican states of Jalisco, Nayarit, Guanajuato, Michoacan, and Tamaulipas.
- Mezcal is another liquor made in Mexico, but it is created from over 25 different agave species. It is made primarily in Oaxaca.
- Tequila is made from steam-baking the piña in an oven prior to processing and aging an average of 5–7 years. The agave is baked in an earthen pit lined with lava rocks and fueled with wood and charcoal, which provides a smokier flavor prior to processing. Mezcal is aged 8–30 years on average.
- Agave is cultivated in orchards called potreros. Historically, piñas were harvested at a certain size. Today, the harvest occurs when the sugar content is at least 24 percent. 🌿



Tips:

- Agave syrup is also known as agave nectar.
- Agave syrup that is light in color is mild and neutral tasting, amber colored has a medium intensity with a caramel flavor, and dark agave syrup has a strong caramel flavor.
- Use the darker agave syrups in foods that are heavily seasoned and the lighter syrups for beverages and fruit desserts.
- Agave syrup dissolves quickly even in cold beverages.
- Swap agave syrup for honey or white sugar in beverages, baking and cooking, but use about 25% less than you would white sugar.
- Simple syrup for cocktails can be made with a 1:1 ration of agave syrup to water. Stir until clear with no need to heat.
- Tequila can be used in dishes such as ceviche, grilled chicken, fresh salsa, marinated steak, and fish. It also pairs well with fruits. Mezcal can be used similarly and adds a smoky flavor. 🌿

Agave Recipes

Healthy Hot Cacao

If you're looking for a warm, chocolaty treat that's also nutritious, try this healthy hot chocolate made with cacao powder. It's made from the same cacao beans as cocoa, but without roasting them before grinding. While proponents say skipping the heat processing preserves more nutrients, cacao and cocoa powders offer similar health benefits, including being rich in antioxidants, which may help improve cholesterol and lower blood pressure. They also contain minerals like iron and magnesium, and give you a bit of fiber, which helps to promote a healthy digestive system. Unlike many hot chocolate recipes, which are high in sugar, this flavorful treat is made with only a little bit of agave syrup for sweetness (you can also sub in honey, maple syrup or regular sugar if you don't have agave on hand). In addition to being wholesome and delicious, this recipe is very easy to make—and whips up in less than 5 minutes!

2 cups reduced-fat milk or unsweetened
nondairy milk
2 tablespoons cacao powder
¼ teaspoon ground cinnamon
1 tablespoon agave syrup

½ teaspoon vanilla extract
Whipping cream or nondairy whipped
cream (optional)
Shaved dark chocolate (optional)

Combine milk, cacao powder and cinnamon in a small saucepan over medium heat; whisk to break up any clumps. Cook, whisking occasionally, until the mixture is smooth and steaming, 2 to 3 minutes. Remove from heat and stir in agave and vanilla. Pour into two mugs. Top with whipped cream and shaved dark chocolate, if desired. Tip: Substitute unsweetened almond milk, oat milk, cashew milk or coconut milk, if desired.

—Andrea Mathis, MA, RDN, LDD
[Eatingwell.com](https://www.eatingwell.com), January 2021 🌿

Grilled Tequila Lime Chicken

Tequila lime chicken is a popular dish for both its ease of preparation and pop of summer flavors. Use blanco tequila for a bright, fresh zing, or reposado for a woodier taste to boost the chicken's grilled flavor. Serve with rice and beans, or coarsely chop the finished chicken and serve with warmed soft corn tortillas for Mexican-style tacos.



2 pounds boneless skinless chicken breast, thighs or a mixture of both
¼ cup blanco or reposado tequila
½ cup lime juice, freshly squeezed if possible
¼ cup lemon juice, freshly squeezed if possible

¼ cup olive oil
3 garlic cloves, minced
2 tablespoons honey
2 tablespoons cilantro, finely chopped
1 ½ teaspoons kosher salt
½ teaspoon black pepper

In a bowl, whisk together all of the ingredients except the chicken. Place the chicken in a sealable plastic bag or in a glass baking dish and pour the mixture over it. Close the bag or cover the baking dish and place in the refrigerator for at least one hour, or overnight for a deeper marinade. When ready to cook, remove the chicken from the marinade and grill over medium high heat for approximately 10 to 15 minutes on each side or until its interior temperature reaches 165°F. Cooking time will vary by thickness of chicken pieces.

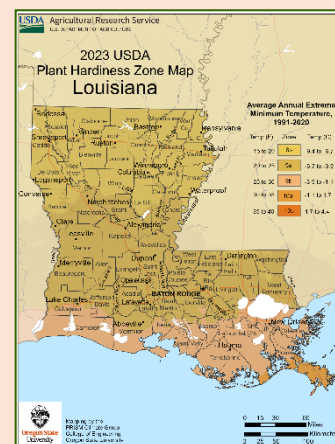
—Ohlq.com 🌿

Climate Check: The Updated USDA Hardiness Zone Map

Excerpted from the [LSU AgCenter article](#) by Heather Kirk-Ballard, LSU AgCenter Horticulturist—please follow the link for the full article and full-sized maps

In November, the U.S. Department of Agriculture released its latest version of the Hardiness Zone Map. This mapping system categorizes geographic regions according to their average annual minimum winter temperatures. It has been updated several times since it was first developed in 1938, but prior to the November release, the most recent update was in 2012.

The November 2023 version was released in response to ongoing climate changes and advancements in climate science. Louisiana's 2023 zoning has been adjusted, with north Louisiana now classified as zone 8b and the southernmost tip as zone 10a — each moving up by half a zone. 🌿



Help Make Our Newsletter Better!

Our newsletter is only as good as what we receive to put into it! We encourage (read: beg!) our members to contribute stories about what you're doing in your gardens, photos of plants, etc. You don't have to write a long, scholarly article (although if you do want to contribute something like that, we'll be glad to have it!); just give us a few words about your herbs, a recipe you love, or a photo of what's looking good in your garden right now. It'll add a lot!

Please send submissions to hsabrnewsletter@gmail.com. We'd appreciate it greatly!

—Kathleen Harrington
HSABR Newsletter Editor 🌿

Garden Maintenance

Maintenance sessions for the Sensory Garden at the Independence Botanical Garden, 7950 Independence Blvd., Baton Rouge, LA 70806, will be announced as they are scheduled. If you can help keep the largest herb garden in this area looking its best, please contact [Judy Hines](#) or [Sylvia Lowe](#) and they'll get you on the Worker Bees mailing list!

We also need volunteers to help maintain the Heritage Garden at Burden. If you'd like to get in on this, please contact [Julie Walsh](#). 🌿

Unless otherwise specified, monthly meetings are held on the fourth Thursday of the month from January through June and August through October, at the LSU AgCenter Botanic Gardens, Ione Burden Conference Center, 4560 Essen Lane, Baton Rouge, LA., from 6:30 – 8:00 p.m. Visitors and guests are welcome. Admission is free for HSABR members, \$5 for all others.

HerbLetter is a monthly publication of the Baton Rouge Unit of the Herb Society of America, for and by its members and friends. For questions, comments, corrections, or to submit articles, announcements, or photos, please write hsabrnewsletter@gmail.com. Items must be received by the 10th of each month for inclusion in the next issue of HerbLetter.

Disclaimer: It is the policy of The Herb Society of America, Baton Rouge Unit, not to advise or recommend herbs for medicinal or health use. Information offered in this newsletter is for educational purposes only. Neither the Herb Society of America nor the Baton Rouge Unit (HSABR) makes medical claims or dispenses medical advice. Women who are pregnant or nursing, and persons with known medical conditions, should consult their licensed healthcare provider before taking any herbal product. HSABR neither endorses nor is in any way responsible for the content of links shared here. Readers must do their own research concerning the safety and usage of any herbs or supplement.

Upcoming Events

February 25, 2024

HERB DAY! SAVE THE DATE!