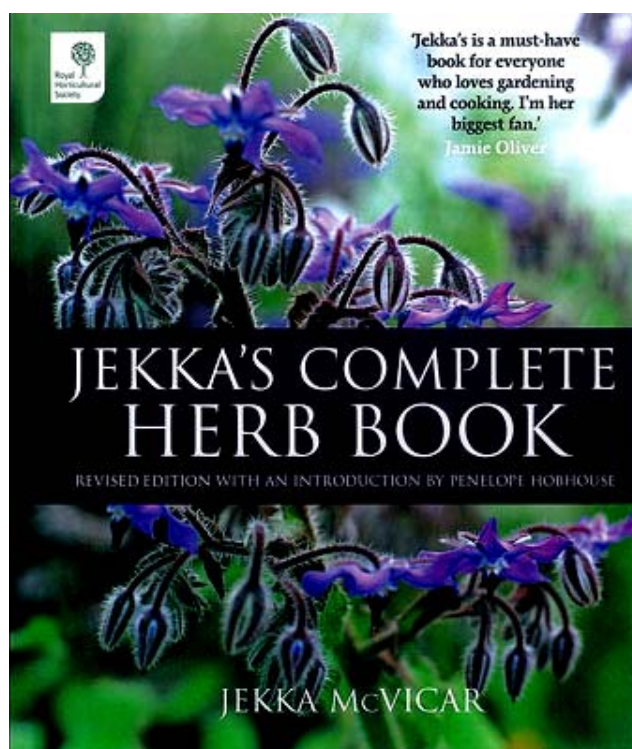


Book Review on 'Jekka's Complete Herb Book'

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• Text by Wilson Wong •



My interest in growing Mediterranean/Western culinary herbs was rekindled after witnessing the success that some members from Green Culture Singapore have in growing various Mediterranean/Western culinary herbs. These herbs were previously thought to be unable to thrive in the tropics.

Contrary to what may first come to your mind, my purpose of growing them are not food related. Instead, I grow them because I simply enjoy the fragrance that they emit when I tend to them. For instance, when I am watering my pots of herbs, I love to run my hands through my mint plants as the fresh menthol scent would never fail to perk me up after a long and tiring day at work. You can liken that to 'instant aromatherapy' in the garden. Through the experience gained, I hope to share the knowledge with fellow gardeners who hope to start a herb garden.

Eager to learn more about various herbs, I went around looking for a comprehensive compendium about them. I came across Jekka's Complete Herb Book that was published in association with the Royal Horticultural Society which is available in one of our local bookstores. The author, Jekka McVicar, one of United Kingdom's foremost authorities on herbs.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part is largely an A to Z encyclopedia which contains profiles of individual herbs. Each profile is arranged in alphabetical order of the plants' botanical names. For people who are not familiar with the herb's Latin botanical name, it would be wise to check the index to find the page where the profile of a particular herb resides.

For each herb, a brief historical background and origin is given. It is followed by descriptions of the common varieties available (at least for those in the UK). Next in line, we can find instructions for cultivation such as growing in a container or outdoor garden, methods of propagation, commonly encountered pests and diseases and the culinary and medicinal attributes of each herb. A warning is put up when a plant contains toxic components. Interestingly, some of the herbs profiles' are accompanied by a tempting recipe. One should not expect to find information about tropical medicinal herbs that are commonly grown in Singapore.

In the second part of the book, the reader will be able to find short sections that are devoted on how one can design an outdoor and container herb gardens, more detailed treatment on propagation and pest and disease management. One can also find information on the preservation herbs for later use, like freezing them and using them to make herb oils, vinegars and preserves.

Note that this book is written for the UK gardener and hence not all plants listed in the book are suitable for growing under Singapore's tropical climate. Neither are all plants suitable for growing outdoors in Singapore due to the heavy rainfall and clayey soils. Some adjustments to growing conditions need to be made.

Overall, this publication would serve as a good reference book for a beginner who is interested in Western herb gardening. Although an extensive list of the cultivars are provided for some herbs, the lack of pictures and further details for each cultivar does not help one to identify a new herb.

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