

Growing the French Tarragon Alternative

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Above: The Mexican Tarragon has narrow, shiny, green leaves.

The French Tarragon (*Artemisia dracunculus* var. *sativa*), also known as the “true” tarragon, is a culinary herb that has a spicy anise flavour. Because it is a cool-growing plant, Singaporeans who wish to grow a pot of the French Tarragon for culinary purposes will often be disappointed. Under our lowland tropical climate, the French Tarragon plant languishes under heat and humidity, making the attempt not rewarding at all.

Fortunately, there is a substitute for the French Tarragon that can be grown easily in Singapore. This more heat-tolerant alternative is the Mexican Tarragon which originates from the warmer parts of southern USA and Mexico. It has a similar anise flavour but it is somewhat more intense when compared to the French Tarragon.

In areas where it is native, the Mexican Tarragon leaf is an important flavouring of 'chocolatl', an Aztec foaming cocoa-based drink. The dried leaves and flowering tops are seeped in hot water to make tea that is a popular drink in Latin America. Medicinally, the plant is used to control madness and epilepsy since the pre-Hispanic era. Recently, it was reported that an aqueous decoction made from dried Mexican Tarragon leaves exerted anti-depressant effects on rats.



Above: The Mexican Tarragon produces edible, small marigold-like flowers.

Botanically known as *Tagetes lucida*, the genus name *Tagetes* refers to the Roman god, Tages who is a descendant of Jupiter while the specific name *lucida* has the meaning of “bright” referring to the bright orange flowers the plant produces. The Mexican Tarragon belongs to the same Daisy Family, Asteraceae, as the French Tarragon but both plants are distant relatives. In fact, the Mexican Tarragon, is more closely related to flowering marigolds as they are classified under the same *Tagetes* genus.

The Mexican tarragon is a perennial shrub that can grow up to more than 60 cm tall with many smooth, upright, unbranched stems. Its narrow leaves take on a shiny, green colour, which is quite unlike the bluish-green foliage colour that is seen in the French Tarragon. The Mexican Tarragon produces clusters of attractive, small yellow flower heads, which look like miniature marigold flowers on the ends of the stems. These flowers are edible and are a tasty and beautiful garnish for fresh green salads. The plant is a good choice to be used to form a border in a medicinal or culinary herb garden.

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Above: A healthy clump of Mexican Tarragon growing under full sunshine in one of the raised beds in Oh Chin Huat Hydroponic Farms.

The Mexican Tarragon, like many other culinary herbs, requires a sunny location to grow healthily and for the production of aromatic oils. On the apartment balcony, the Mexican Tarragon should be located in an area where it can receive at least 4 hours of direct sunshine. Outdoors, the plant can be grown in a semi-shaded area where it is protected from the intense tropical sunshine.

Plants should preferably be located in an area with good air circulation. One should avoid growing the Mexican Tarragon plant near a concrete wall as radiant heat emitted from the wall can affect its growth.

The Mexican Tarragon can be successfully grown hydroponically in a well-aerated environment at the roots. In soil, it is best to grow in using a well-drained, porous potting mix. In containers, plants should be allowed to dry out a little before the next watering. Outdoors, it is recommended to grow the Mexican Tarragon using raised beds filled with soil that provides good drainage.



Above: The tall stems can be cut back regularly to ensure a compact growth habit. The cut material can be used for propagation.

Although the plant is said to be fairly drought tolerant, it should not be allowed to dry out completely, especially during the hot and dry season. Regular and thorough watering is still compulsory. Compost should be incorporated into the soil to help hold some moisture at the roots, as well as, to provide sufficient nutrients for plant growth as the compost breaks down.

Plants can be pruned back regularly to promote a bushy growth habit and spent blossoms should be cut away to increase flowering. Plant material obtained from each pruning operation can be used for both culinary and propagation purposes. Fresh leaves can be used for cooking immediately while the excess can be dried and stored in a cool, dry place for later use.

Alternatively, tip-cuttings can be used for vegetative propagation of the Mexican Tarragon. Root them via standing in some water. This is a much faster and more convenient way of multiplying one's plants because the seeds of the Mexican Tarragon are not readily available locally. Layering the stems of the plant with some soil and division of clumps are two other ways of propagating more plants.

The Mexican Tarragon is a plant that is seldom bothered by pests. Watch out for spider mite infestation during the hotter and drier times of the year. Spray plants with the relatively non-toxic summer oil to smother and control their population.

A rather disease-free plant, the Mexican Tarragon is quite susceptible to root rot when it is planted in wet, heavy, clayey soils. The disease manifests itself first via the wilting of leaves due to the inability of the plant to uptake water. Leaves located near the base of the plant gradually turn black and then rot away. Severely affected plants will come off easily when one tries to lift the plant and one will also notice that the soil end of the stem will have little or no healthy roots left.

At the time of writing this feature article, the Mexican Tarragon can only be bought from two local sources, namely, Oh Chin Huat Hydroponic Farms located at Bah Soon Pah Road and Gerikoh, an online store (<http://www.gerikoh.com.sg>).

References

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