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Lemon Balm or Lemon Bomb?

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Such a lovely herb. So pretty in the garden, so fragrant, so soothing in a tea. Thus go the usual hymns of praise for lemon balm ? not a major herb but, to its admirers, one that should be in every herb garden. This summer it?s certainly in mine, in most of it in fact. A lemon bomb has gone off there.

The original plant was always vigorous but not troublesome. Gradually it encroached on, then nearly swamped, the oregano ? which is by no means a weak competitor. Now lemon balm seedlings have carpeted the surrounding territory as well, even the cracks between pavers. The plant is well known for its double arsenal of spreading roots and prolific seed. Perhaps last winter?s mildness (balminess?) triggered this spring?s seed explosion. In any case, it?s not surprising that this herb remains a minor one.

The virtues noted above are nonetheless real. Lemon balm?s leaves are bright green with neatly scalloped edges. The modest whitish flowers are almost on a par, as bee magnets, with showier blooms like lavender. Fragrance is the plant?s strongest point. Even pulling out thousands of tiny volunteers is relaxing, thanks to the minty-lemon scent your hands stir up. How many nuisance-creators come with aromatherapy?

They say that if life gives you lemons, make lemonade. If life gives you 20 times more lemon balm than you want, there are some oft-touted options, many of them useless. The plant?s minty-lemony flavor doesn?t hold up under much heat. It?s good in iced tea, with honey. A few snippets spark up a salad. But like most of the mint family, to which it belongs, lemon balm has firm, rather scratchy leaves that stick to your tongue, mouth and throat when you try to swallow them. (Basil, a more popular mint cousin, does not.) Also, the lemon notes that speak so well to the nose are more subtle to the palate. You don?t get the lemony burst you get from lemon verbena or lemon grass.

The most famous lemon balm recipe is an easy one: Put some fresh leaves in a cup and pour in boiling water. The resulting tea is guaranteed to quiet the nerves, soothe aching muscles, calm the savage beast and relax her for sleep. After the cup I made last night I fell asleep on the couch immediately. But because that happens every night after a long day of farm work, it was hardly a controlled experiment.

I also tried the second most common recipe, lemon verbena pesto. Like other pestos that employ green matter other than basil ? arugula, parsley and such ? this one suffered by comparison with the herb that made pesto a household word. Blended with olive oil, garlic and coarse salt, my pesto was okay. Tossed with spaghetti it was actually quite good after I added handfuls of grated imported parmigiano-reggiano cheese. And a generous squirt of lemon.

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