Mexican tarragon is the marigold of the herb garden

Tarragon is a perennial herb with a wonderful slight anise flavor. It is also a beautiful ornamental landscape plant that rewards us with beautiful yellow flowers this time of year.

Cooks agree that tarragon has much more flavor when fresh. Unlike most of the other herbs, tarragon loses the potency of its flavor when dried. When using tarragon in cooked dishes, it is best to add it at the end, as heat tends to decrease its flavor. This may be one reason it is so frequently preserved in vinegar, which captures tarragon’s essence and creates a tasty condiment that can be used in many sauces.

French tarragon is the classic variety. Unfortunately, it does not grow well in the Gulf Coast’s hot and humid summers. So if you want to add a wonderful fresh tarragon flavor to your dishes, cooks and gardeners can substitute Mexican tarragon.

Mexican tarragon (*Tagetes lucida*) is native to Mexico and Guatemala and loves the heat and humidity, providing abundant leaves for cooking all summer. The flavor of Mexican tarragon is a bit spicier than that of French tarragon, having an accent of cinnamon in addition to the sweet licorice taste normally associated with tarragon. It can be used in the same manner as French tarragon, and gives whatever dish it is in an extra dimension of zest.

Mexican tarragon is also called Spanish tarragon or Mexican mint marigold. It is related to the marigolds we grow as summer annual bedding plants. This becomes apparent in late summer and fall when these plants burst into bloom with clusters of bright gold flowers. The pretty yellow flowers are a tasty and beautiful addition to fresh green salads.

Mexican tarragon is an attractive landscape ornamental. It produces a delicate, understated small shrub that isn’t gaudy or flashy. Use it in perennial borders where its shiny green leaves and little golden flowers make a polite, subtle statement.
Mexican tarragon is carefree, generally pest free and easy to grow. This reliable perennial grows in sunny spots but will tolerate partial shade. It prefers well drained soil and is fairly drought tolerant. As with most herbs, Mexican tarragon does not like “wet feet.” Water only when needed, preferably in the morning. The ideal watering method for herbs, in general, is drip irrigation. A drip irrigation system can be as simple as a soaker hose snaked under the mulch to a commercially installed one. Avoid feast or famine watering cycles, and strive for a consistent level of moisture for optimal growing performance.

In zone 8, this plant does go dormant with the first freeze but comes back reliably from its roots in the spring. The plants are generally about 3 feet tall, depending on how much you have harvested them and you can harvest the foliage all summer long.

It’s best to harvest on a regular basis. The more often herb plants are cut, the better the plants thrive and produce. The best time of day to harvest herbs is early morning (oil content is at its highest), and the best time of the season is prior to blooming. Some experts believe that stress brings out the aroma and flavor of herbs, so do not over water or overfeed.

To preserve fresh tarragon that cannot be used in a few days, try freezing it. Simply put the stripped leaves in a freezer bag or container and freeze dry. You can also stretch the fresh life of tarragon 3-4 days by placing it in a jar of water in the refrigerator. Any fresh tarragon that cannot be used within one week of picking or purchasing should be frozen.

Theresa Friday is the Environmental Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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