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Easy-To-Grow Tarragon Adds Sprightly Flavor to Summer Dishes

- Orin Martin

In Latin it's *Artemisia dracunculis*; the French dub it *herbe au dragon*; and we call it tarragon. *Dracunculus* is also affectionately known as "little dragon," referring to the brownish-red, gnarled, coiled roots of the plant and its serpentine-like appearance. Tarragon is a corruption of the French word *esdragon*, or dragon.

There are written records of tarragon being in cultivation during Greek times (500 BC). Like garlic, there has never been any evidence of tarragon producing flowers and viable seed. It is exclusively propagated asexually (and quite easily) by root divisions or succulent cuttings. There exists a variety of "tarragon" grown from seed and often sold as Russian tarragon, which is to be eschewed. It is, to quote Mick Jagger and the boys, "rather common and coarse," having the aroma of puppy breath and the taste and texture of bicycle inner tubes.

In the Middle Ages, tarragon was thought to increase stamina. Twigs tucked into pilgrims' shoes before long journeys were said to quicken the pace of walking and focus the mind to the task at hand. It was also thought to be useful for drawing the venom from snake bites and for treating the "bite of the mad dog."

At any rate, tarragon is nowadays esteemed for its sprightly flavor. Its essential oil has a zingy, almost effervescent quality. The leaves are used both dried and fresh (fresh is much preferred). Tarragon is the herb of choice, along with fresh dill, on and in fish dishes. And of course it is "de rigueur" in béarnaise sauces. (Question: Has anyone who is not a top notch cook ever really made a béarnaise sauce?)

Probably the most utilitarian manner in which to extend the "fresh" tarragon season is to concoct your own tarragon-herb vinegar. The fresh leaves are steeped in apple cider or white wine vinegar at a heavy concentration for 1-3 weeks. Then the concoction is decanted, that is, poured through a sieve and diluted to the strength desired with straight vinegar. It can then be bottled with a fresh sprig of tarragon in each bottle to enhance the "cutesy herb" look, labeled, and kept at the ready on the kitchen counter next to the highest quality bottle of olive oil. Add a dash of bleu cheese, some fresh sea salt, and you've got an exquisite salad dressing to go with your home-grown salad mix (see page 2).

Tarragon cultivation tips -

- Available in 2" pot starts in May-June in local nurseries
- This perennial, a member of the Asteraceae family, likes light (sandy), well-drained soils, in full sun or partial shade
- Apply compost to the surface in spring and again after the second round of harvest (May-June)
- Tarragon has extensive lateral surface roots, so mulch to protect them
- Make 3-5 cuttings a year for commercial harvest or a sprig or two continuously over the summer
- Subject to leaf fungus along the coast during foggy stretches
- Goes partially to completely dormant in winter; mark the plant's location with a stake so that you can locate it again in spring
- Propagate by dividing root/crown into 2-4" pieces at the end of the winter dormant season just prior to resumption of growth
- Take 3-5" tip cuttings for propagation from June-August
- Moderate nitrogen fertility coupled with ample water, associated with warm sunny weather equals sublime quality and quantity of harvests
- If you choose to dry a portion of your crop, harvest leaves in June; be careful to avoid bruising them. Dry them in a single layer in a warm room.