

Sweet, Sweet Stevia

Stevia, *Stevia rebaudiana*, is a tropical herb famous for its sweet leaves. In recent years, it has been increasingly popular as a sugar substitute. It does not contain any carbohydrates and is great for diabetics. Stevia is easy to grow, either in your herb garden or as a house plant.

Stevia likes well drained soil and plenty of sun. We've grown it in part shade, and it performed reasonably well, but it is more productive with more light. It grows about a foot tall and can be somewhat floppy, so give it plenty of room. Fertilize with compost or compost tea a couple of times during the growing season. Keep the weeds at bay, water if needed, don't run over it with the lawn mower and you should be all set. Stevia is a tropical plant and HATES cold weather, so wait until nights are above 50 degrees and the soil is warm to the touch before you plant it.

You can also grow stevia in containers. It is a fairly large plant, so either plant it by itself or combine it with other robust plants in a large container like a whiskey barrel. If you grow it alone, a ten-inch diameter pot would be ideal, although we have wintered stevia in pots as small as 6 inches.

Speaking of wintering stevia, that's not hard, either. Place it in a window that gets full sun, preferable in a cool room, water it when the surface dries out and fertilize it when you remember. Keep an eye on it and make sure it stays free of aphids, whiteflies and other house plant pests. We've found it grows a little during the winter, so you can snip the occasional leaf without harming the plant.

Harvest stevia when plants reach 10 to 12 inches tall by cutting the top half of the stalks; here in Maine we can cut stevia 3 or 4 times during the summer. If you live where the growing season is longer, you may get additional cuttings. You can use stevia fresh or you can dry it.

So, you've grown and harvested a summer's worth of stevia -now how do you use it?

- It is great in beverages. Making sun tea? Toss a stem or two or three into the jar. In the winter, put a pinch of dried stevia into a tea ball and fill the ball with dried mint. YUM!
- Sweeten fruit with stevia. We stew it with rhubarb very successfully (1-2 tablespoons, chopped to each cup of fruit)
- Use it in granola in place of honey or maple syrup.
- Try it in apple pie.
- Remember that dried stevia is a lot more concentrated than fresh stevia, so you'll need less of the dried form.

Hummingbird Farm

HummingbirdFarm.net * Cindy Tibbetts
202 Bean Street Turner, Maine 04282
(207) 224-8220 hummingbird@megalink.net

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