



Your Thai Kitchen Garden

Nothing makes a Thai curry sing like fresh ingredients. Sure, you can open a jar of curry paste and make something delicious; but add your own fresh ingredients, and you enter the world of the sublime. Our Keys climate is perfect for growing a full complement of ingredients for your Thai kitchen, and most of them are extremely easy to grow and maintain.



Fresh **lemongrass** is perhaps the best treat, because what is available in stores is often so old. Pick lemongrass stalks that are small, using only the most tender core of each stalk. Plant a few stalks in a large pot to keep it under control. If planted in the ground in the Keys, you will have a large, unmanageable plant.

Thai basil lends an anise flavor enhanced by cooking. It is easy to grow in pots or in the ground, with just water and occasional pruning. It reseeds freely without taking over your garden. In a pinch, substitute regular basil in Asian dishes, but make sure to add it at the end of cooking to preserve its fresh flavor. Our favorite variety of regular basil at the Key West Garden Club is Purple Ruffles, which stands up to the Keys heat and pests.



Ginger grows nicely in a large pot and can provide a year-round supply for your kitchen. Home-grown ginger has a fruitier flavor than the older pieces you can buy. You can plant knobby pieces from the grocery store – just google “planting ginger” for instructions. The only tip for the Keys is to protect your pot from strong winds, as the tender stocks break easily.

You can have a steady supply of **cilantro** by starting your plants from seed. Cilantro plants have a short life, so start new seeds every four weeks so you always have tender leaves. Soak seeds overnight before planting, and keep them well-watered until sprouted. If you have enough room, let a few plants flower so you can collect the seeds for next year’s crop. Take a break during the summer, as cilantro does not thrive in the intense heat.





Thai peppers will add the spicy element to your Asian dishes. These small red beauties can be used fresh or dried. Thai peppers can be dried and smoked for an intense, deep flavor.



Even a small **Key Lime** tree can produce buckets of fresh fruit for squeezing over your curry dishes. If you love Thai flavors and have enough room, grow a **Makrut lime** tree so you can use the fresh leaves in your curries. A Makrut lime can grow quite large in the Keys, but it doesn't mind hard pruning to keep it to a manageable size.



Some cooks might go so far as to make their own coconut milk from all the extra coconuts falling from our trees. That is a step too far for me, when canned coconut milk is so convenient and delicious.

You can get a good start on most of these plants at Key West Garden Club's Fall Plant Sale and Art Show, Friday and Saturday, November 19 and 20, 2021 from 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. at the West Martello Tower in Key West. We will have experts on hand to answer your questions and help you select the best plants for your kitchen garden and schedule.



Article by Sharon Thomas