

Ginger Growing Guide

One of a handful of spices that's widely used in both sweet and savory foods, ginger (*Zingiber officinale*) adds flavorful zest and enticing aroma to cookies, cakes, and quick breads, as well as stir-fries, marinades, and curries. Ginger boasts numerous health benefits in addition to its versatility in the kitchen.



The use of ginger dates back at least 3,000 years, both as a flavoring and for its medicinal properties. This tropical to subtropical perennial likely originated in Southeast Asia in Micronesia; from there, it was transported around the globe via seafaring expeditions and the spice trade. The wild form of ginger no longer exists; the ginger we know today has been transformed over thousands of years of cultivation by humans.

Given its long history and widespread popularity, growing ginger in your youth garden opens up a world of learning opportunities in subjects across the curriculum, including botany, geography, health, and history, as well as inviting an array of multicultural connections. Ginger can be grown in gardens and raised beds; however, in all but the warmest regions, the plant is most easily grown in containers.

Ginger Facts

- Ginger is a mainstay in cuisines around the world. It is a must-have ingredient in countless dishes and is consumed in numerous forms, including fresh, pickled, crystallized, candied, dehydrated, and powdered.
- A carbonated, flavored drink dating back to the 1800s, ginger ale was originally a fermented brew made with fresh ginger, sugar, water, and a yeast starter. Today, most commercial ginger ale is made with carbonated water, sweetener, and ginger flavoring and contains little or no actual ginger.
- Ginger contains vitamin C, vitamin B6, magnesium, potassium, copper, manganese, and fiber.
- The pungent flavor of raw ginger, and likely many of its health-promoting properties, is due to gingerol compounds. Cooking ginger takes away some of the heat and pungency.
- Ginger reduces inflammation and has shown promise in contributing to the overall improvement of the immune system. Researchers are also looking into its antibacterial, antifungal, and antiviral properties. Ginger is commonly used to soothe sore throats and ease nausea.
- Although it's sometimes referred to as ginger root, the fleshy underground part isn't a root but rather a type of modified stem called a rhizome that has growing points (nodes) along its length.
- "Stem ginger" is a culinary term that refers to pieces of ginger that have been peeled, sliced, and cooked in a sugar syrup.
- There are many plants with "ginger" in the common name, most of which are not edible. These include ornamental tropical gingers such as butterfly ginger (*Hedychium spp.*), shampoo ginger (*Zingiber zerumbet*), shell ginger (*Alpinia spp.*), peacock ginger (*Kaempferia spp.*), and spiral ginger (*Costus spp.*) as well as the wild gingers that are native to temperate regions (*Asarum spp.*).

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How to Grow

Ginger requires a long, warm growing season and grows best in temperatures between 60° and 80° F. Cooler and warmer temperatures can stunt growth, and freezing temperatures will kill the plant. Expect the plant to take eight to 10 months to reach harvest size, though a few small harvests can be done earlier than that while the plant is still growing. Ginger is rated hardy in USDA Hardiness Zones 8 or 9 to 12. In most climates, the plant grows best in containers, so it can be kept in the warmest spots possible and brought indoors to mature, if necessary. You'll need to be patient to grow ginger — the plant is slow-growing at first but will grow quickly once it gets going.

Choosing varieties

Although you can buy ginger from seed companies, the easiest and most economical source is your local market. If available, choose organic ginger; some commercial ginger is treated with sprout inhibitors. That said, conventional ginger will likely sprout just fine. If possible, choose plump-looking pieces with smooth, translucent skin; these are likely the freshest and mostly likely to grow. Look for nodes or growing points ("eyes") along the rhizome; this is where the shoots will form.

You can plant whole pieces or break the roots into smaller, 3-4" pieces. Larger pieces provide the sprouting plant with more food reserves, resulting in faster growth. If you broke the stem into pieces, leave the pieces out to allow the exposed flesh to heal over for a few days before planting.

Selecting a site

Mature ginger plants will be 3' to 4' tall and will form a clump that's 1' to 2' wide; keep this size in mind when selecting a planting site. In cool climates, choose the warmest spot, such as one near a wall that will absorb heat and reflect light onto the plants, in regions with hot, sunny summers, ginger benefits from light shade. Ginger prefers loose, well-drained soil that is rich in organic matter; amend the soil with compost prior to planting.

Growing in containers is especially helpful in cool climates; the soil in containers heats up faster than garden soil. In addition, you can move the containers as needed. Choose containers with drainage holes that are at least 12" wide and deep.

Planting

Wait to plant until the soil has warmed and nighttime temperatures are consistently above 55° F. In the garden, set the rhizome pieces in a 6" deep hole, placing them with the growing points facing up, and then cover them with 2" of soil. Water the soil lightly to moisten it; avoid overwatering, which can lead to rot. If growing in containers, fill the container to within 6" of the top with a freely draining, compost-rich potting mix amended with slow-release organic fertilizer. If the container is 12" to 14" in diameter, place one large rhizome on the surface with the growing points facing up. In larger containers, place rhizomes 6" apart. Cover the rhizomes with 2" of potting mix. Water the soil lightly to moisten it; avoid overwatering, which can lead to rot.

Care

Water sparingly until shoots appear. Be patient; it can take several weeks for the ginger sprouts to appear. If growing in containers, placing them in a warm spot will speed growth. When the shoots appear at the soil surface, move the containers to a full-sun location. For both in-ground beds and containers, once the ginger shoots are 3" tall, apply a 2" layer of organic mulch, such as straw, shredded bark, or pine straw, to conserve soil moisture and keep weeds at bay. Keep soil moist but not saturated throughout the growing season, and remove weeds regularly.

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Harvest

Ginger plants require eight to 10 months to reach full maturity. For the largest crop, wait as long as possible to harvest your ginger.

- In warm climates, wait until the foliage begins to turn yellow and die back.
- In cool climates, harvest your ginger before the first hard frost.

To harvest from in-ground beds, gently loosen the soil using a garden fork, taking care not to damage the rhizomes. If your soil is very loose, you may be able to pull up the entire plant. Otherwise, reach into the soil with your hands to free the rhizomes so you can pull the plant.

To harvest from containers, gently tip the container and allow the soil to spill out. Carefully remove the rhizomes.

Cut off the stems and rinse the rhizomes, removing as much soil as possible, and then allow them to air dry. Your ginger is ready to enjoy!

Tips

- If your garden soil was amended with compost prior to planting, your ginger plants should need little supplemental fertilizer. Container-grown ginger may benefit from monthly applications of an all-purpose organic fertilizer.
- In tropical climates, ginger is an evergreen perennial; in subtropical areas that experience cooler temperatures, the tops will die back each fall and the plant will resume growth in spring. Ginger is rated as hardy in USDA Hardiness Zones 9-11. It won't survive in regions where the soil freezes.
- If you're growing ginger in containers, you can overwinter them indoors. Bring the plants inside before night-time temperatures drop below 55° F. The plants may continue to grow, or they may naturally die back and enter a period of dormancy for a few months. If they die back, cut off the dried foliage and water sparingly. In a few months, they should resume growth.
- Outdoors, ginger plants are rarely bothered by pests, except perhaps slugs or snails. Indoor plants are prone to common houseplant pests, such as mealybugs, aphids, and spider mites.
- Save some of your ginger harvest for replanting.
- Ginger plants may produce flowers, but generally not until the plants are at least two years old.

Enjoying Your Harvest

Recipes that feature fresh ginger abound in cookbooks and online. It's featured prominently in cuisines from across Asia, including China, India, Japan, Korea, and Thailand, as well as those in the Middle East and the Caribbean. Thus, ginger is a gateway for youth to explore global cuisines, cultures, and history.

For a simple, soothing, warming drink, pour boiling water over pieces of fresh ginger, allow it to steep, and then sweeten it with honey.

Store your ginger harvest in a cool, dark spot. Garden-grown ginger won't have time to develop the thick, tough skin you see on store-bought ginger, meaning that it has a shorter shelf life. If you aren't able to use all your fresh ginger within a few weeks, you can preserve the rest by freezing, drying, candying, or pickling it.

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