Growing and Using Edible Gingers in North Florida

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Gingers are some of the easiest plants to grow here in North Florida. They seem to have very few pests and many of them have beautiful, fragrant flowers and foliage pleasing to the eye. Used in landscapes to provide texture and a fleeting splash of color, they are much prized and sought after.

Did you know that, in addition to their beauty and landscape value, some of them are quite tasty? I grow three types of edible gingers which I use in a wide range of recipes. None of them is quite as showy as the ornamentals but they have found a place in my yard and perform very well.

The most versatile ginger I grow is the one found in the produce section of the grocery store sold as “ginger root”. Horticulturists know it as *Zingiber officinale*. I know it as common ginger. The plant is rather unremarkable in appearance with thin dark green leaves. In my yard it is in partial shade and moist clay soil right next to the air conditioner drain. It gets about three feet tall and as it grows it spreads out.

I have never seen mine bloom but I am told that it does have a rather pretty flower. I harvest the roots of this plant after the foliage has died back in the fall or early winter. I simply dig the roots out and scrub them with a vegetable brush. The root of this plant can be dried and powdered or can be used fresh.

Ginger spice is used in many American recipes such as gingerbread or cookies and is even used to make ginger ale. I like to use mine fresh. Since I only harvest the roots once a year, I freeze the scrubbed roots whole with the peel left on. Then when I need some for a recipe, I just grate off the amount I will use (no need to peel, the grater does that for you!) and return the rest to the freezer.

There is nothing better than the aroma the fresh ginger gives off when it hits the hot oil in my wok. I use it as a starting point with most stir-fries. It can also be used in many Asian dishes as well as East Indian recipes.

I did not find my plant at the nursery; I found it at my favorite grocery store. I bought a ginger root that looked full and healthy, not dried or pinched. When I got home I broke off a piece that appeared to be trying to grow. I planted it one or two inches below the soil in a pot and put it outside during the summer. After the plant sprouted and got a good start, I set it out in its present location and have been enjoying the harvest ever since.
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*Curcuma longa* or turmeric is another easily grown edible ginger. It is much more decorative looking than is the *Zingiber officinale*. The turmeric plant grows to three feet and has lush green leaves that are about five inches wide. This is a hardy ginger which dies back in the winter but returns reliably in late spring.

I am told this turmeric blooms but I have never had it do so. The blooms are described as green and white tipped in scarlet pink with small yellow flowers. Sounds beautiful! I planted this ginger in part sun and clay soil. It does a great job of adding texture in front of a short chain-link fence on the east side of our yard.

Have you ever looked at the ingredients in yellow mustard? It contains turmeric! That, in fact, is what makes the mustard yellow. Not many American recipes that I have seen call for turmeric except for some pickle recipes. I use it in almost every East Indian dish I make. Turmeric is thought to aid in digestion and is ubiquitous in Indian cookery.

As in common ginger, dig the roots after the plant goes dormant in late fall or early winter. I have never used it fresh; I dry the root and powder it. I understand, however, that in Thailand, the fresh root is grated and added to foods and is part of yellow curry paste used there. Watch out! It can stain. The stain can be removed with a little bleach or by exposure to the sun. My plant did not come from a nursery but was given to me by David Skinner, a ginger specialist who lives in Tallahassee. For more information about him and his gingers, visit his website [www.gingersrus.com](http://www.gingersrus.com).

One other ginger I use in cooking is *Alpinia galanga* known as Galangal. The only dishes I use this in are Thai in origin. I wish I knew more uses because this plant is very robust and grows extremely well in Tallahassee. I started with one little piece of rhizome given to me by a Thai friend. Now I have enough to occasionally supply the Thai restaurants in town.

This is a great background plant. Mine grows seven feet tall every year after dying back to the ground in winter. It blooms reliably but unfortunately the white blooms are not showy. It is pleasing, however, to see the spots of white among the light green of the leaves. I dig the roots whenever I need some for Thai recipes but usually do thinning and major harvesting in the late winter. I have planted it in dappled shade in heavy clay soil with a layer of leaf mulch on top.

I urge you to try your hand at edible gingers. They are not only eye-pleasing in the landscape but they will reward your taste buds as well!

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