

# Florida Food Fare

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## Lemon Grass

**Description:** One of the most important flavorings in Thai cooking, this herb has long, thin gray-green leaves and a scallion-like base. Until recently, lemon grass was primarily grown in India, Indonesia and South East Asia but with the increasing popularity of Thai cuisine it is now grown in Florida and California as well. Citral, an essential oil also found in lemon peel, gives lemon grass its lemony fragrance and light refreshing taste. The stalks are too tough to eat but impart its distinctive flavor when simmered in a liquid. Lemon grass is also called citronella and sereh. It is available fresh, dried or powdered.

**Cultivation:** When buying lemon grass fresh, check the bases to see if any of the roots are intact. If so you can take this stalk and start your own lemon grass plant. Place the root end in water with a bit of plant food until roots develop. Plant in an area that gets full sun but is protected from the wind. It prefers a sandy soil and plenty of moisture. Lemon grass is sensitive to cold so it is often grown in pots that may be brought inside when necessary. Under ideal conditions it can grow to 6 feet in height. Outside the tropics it will grow to about 3 feet.

**Selection and Storage:** When purchasing fresh lemon grass, look for ones that have plump bases and long blade-like green leaves. It can be stored whole in the refrigerator in plastic for up to two weeks. It freezes well and holds for up to 5 months.

**Preparation and Use:** Lemon grass is used to flavor teas, soups, stews marinades and curries. It blends well with garlic, chilies and cilantro and helps to lighten some of the richer tasting dishes while adding a zing to others. When using it fresh, strip off the tough outer leaves and cut off the bottom root portion. Slice into rings or strips and bruise the pieces to release the flavor before adding to your favorite sauce or soup. You can remove the large pieces of lemon grass before serving. If using dried lemon grass, soak in hot water to reconstitute.

Lemon grass is used commercially in soaps, sachets and perfumes. The oil is also used to cleanse oily skin and in aromatherapy as a relaxant. It has been used for centuries as an herbal medicine in Indonesia and Malaysia.

## Recipes:

### Lemon Grass Chicken

|   |  |
|---|--|
| 1 1/4 pounds boneless, skinless chicken breasts | 1 to 2 stalks fresh lemon grass (2 tablespoons minced) |
| 1 1/2 tablespoons honey                         | 3 cloves garlic, minced                                |
| 3 tablespoons fish sauce or soy sauce           | 1 large onion, thinly sliced                           |
| 1 1/2 tablespoons canola oil                    | 3 tablespoons fresh cilantro for garnish               |

Cut the chicken breasts into 2 by 1/8 inch strips. Combine chicken, honey and 1 tablespoon of fish sauce in a bowl and marinate 10 minutes. Trim the green leaves and root end off the lemon grass stalk and remove the outside leaves. What remains will be a greenish cream-colored core 4 to 5 inches long. Mince finely. Just before serving, heat a large non-stick fry pan or wok over high heat and swirl in the oil. Add the garlic and lemon grass and stir fry until fragrant but not brown, about 15 seconds. Add the chicken and stir fry until the pieces turn white. Move the chicken to the sides and add the onion. Stir fry until the onion is tender about 1 minute. Mix the chicken back in the center, add remaining fish sauce, continue frying until the chicken is cooked 2 to 3 minutes. May add more honey or fish sauce to taste. Sprinkle with cilantro to serve. Makes 4 servings.

### Asparagus with Lemon Grass and Shallot Vinaigrette

|                                    |                                  |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1 1/2 pounds asparagus stalks      | Salt and pepper to taste         |
| 1/4 cup olive oil                  | 1 tablespoon Dijon mustard       |
| 3 1/2 tablespoons red wine vinegar | 2 tablespoons shallots, minced   |
|                                    | 1 tablespoon lemon grass, minced |

Trim asparagus if necessary. Cook in a small amount of water 4 to 8 minutes until tender but firm, depending on the size. Drain under cold water and set aside. Combine remaining ingredients and whisk vigorously. Taste for seasoning and add what is necessary. Pour dressing over and let it rest for at least 15 minutes. Serve at room temperature.

### Stir-Fried Shrimp With Lemon Grass

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| 1 tablespoon lemon grass, chopped fine | 1/4 pound sliced mushrooms |
| 1 tablespoon garlic minced             | 1/4 pound snow peas        |

|  |   |
|--|---|
| 1/2 teaspoon salt                                  | 3 tablespoons fish sauce                                    |
| Pepper to taste                                    | 1 tablespoon sugar  |
| 4 dried chili peppers, seeded,<br>soaked, chopped  | 1 tablespoon cornstarch dissolved in<br>2 tablespoons water |
| 4 tablespoons oil                                  | 2 tablespoons green onions, slivered                        |
| 2 pounds large raw shrimp,<br>shelled and deveined | 1/4 cup peanuts, chopped                                    |

Pound first 5 ingredients to make a paste or use food processor. Heat oil in a non-stick skillet or wok. Add paste mixture and stir-fry until the aroma is released. Increase heat and add shrimp, mushrooms and snow peas. Stir fry until shrimp is cooked through. Mix fish sauce, sugar, cornstarch and water. Add to pan and heat through until sauce thickens. Garnish with green onions and peanuts and serve over rice. Serves 8.

### Pasta With Vegetables and Lemon

|                           |  |
|---------------------------|--|
| 9 ounces angel hair pasta | 1 1/2 cups chicken broth               |
| 1 tablespoon olive oil    | 2 teaspoons cornstarch                 |
| 1 carrot, thinly sliced   | 2 teaspoons lemon juice                |
| 1/4 cup chopped onion     | 1 tablespoon grated fresh ginger       |
| 2 cups broccoli florets   | 1 lemon grass stalk, finely chopped    |
| 1 cup sliced zucchini     | 1/8 teaspoon crushed hot pepper flakes |

Cook pasta according to package directions. In large non-stick skillet, saute' carrot and onion in olive oil until onion has softened, about 2 minutes. Add broccoli, zucchini, 1/2 cup of the chicken broth. Cover and simmer 3 minutes. Combine remaining cup of broth with cornstarch and lemon juice and add to vegetables. Stir in ginger, lemon grass and hot pepper flakes. Cook until sauce has thickened slightly and vegetables are crisp and tender. Serve immediately over hot pasta.