**List of Readily Available Plants to Start Your Own Latin American Ethnobotanical Garden**

Chances are good if you have any experience cultivating a home or school vegetable garden, you already have some expertise with Latin American plants! The list of annual and perennial plants originally domesticated by indigenous peoples of Latin America for food, drink, fiber, dyes, medicine, etc. is very long. Many of the plants you know and some presented here will be new. The list below is alphabetized by scientific name followed by common names in English and Spanish. This list only includes plants that are available through local garden centers or in some cases, online as seed or live plants. In our experience, the perennial plants listed are reliably *perennial* in USDA Plant Hardiness Zone 8a and higher. If unsure of your growing zone, go to this [USDA website](https://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/PHZMWeb/) and simply punch in your zip code. Thanks to the Columbian Exchange, we also include a small number of plants naturalized in Latin America that are now culturally important in the Latin America region.

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| Plant Species | Origin | Annual or Perennial | Plant Uses |
| *Agave* spp. (century plant, maguey and over 100 common names in Spanish for distinct species) | Indigenous use of numerous agave species dates back some 12,000 yrs. Over 200 species are found throughout the Americas but the greatest diversity is found in arid regions of Mexico and the Caribbean. | A perennial plant, Agaves vary in size, typically forming a rosette of leathery leaves with sharp spines on leaf margins and tips. Many species produce vegetative “pups” and when an individual flowers after 10-30 years it dies. | Many books have been written about the traditional uses of *Agave* spp. An incomplete list would include fiber for mats, twines, sandals, etc., agave nectar, mescal, pulque and tequila, the heart of some species can be roasted and eaten. |
| *Aloysia triphylla* (lemon verbena, cedrón, hierba Luisa) | Native to Argentina and Chile. | Perennial, woody shrub, grows 4-5’ high. Requires full sun. | Highly fragrant (lemon scent) leaves used in teas to treat stomach pain, colds, insomnia, anxiety. Leaves/flowers also used in salads. |
| *Amaranthus* spp. (amaranth, amaranto) | A staple food crops of indigenous Mesoamerican peoples, domesticated over 6,000 yrs. ago. | Annual, grows 4-6’ tall, depending on cultivar. Requires full sun. | As a pseudocereal, the seeds and some species leaves are edible and nutritious. Also used for dyes, ornamental flowers. |
| *Arachis hypogaea* (peanut, groundnut maní, cacahuete) | Likely domestication in what is today NW Argentina or SE Bolivia, some 7,500 yrs. ago. | Annual, nitrogen-fixing legume. Typically takes 4-5 months from seed to harvest. Requires full sun. | Nitrogen-fixing edible legume. Brought to U.S. be enslaved Africans after crop brought to Africa by the Portuguese. |
| *Capsicum* spp. (pepper, chile) | Indigenous domestication in Mesoamerica and South America (several species) at least 6,000 yrs. ago. | Annual—includes bell peppers and chile peppers (there are 5 domesticated species and now 10s of thousands of cultivars. Full sun. | Most all peppers are high in vitamin C. The chemical compound capsaicin used medicinally to relieve muscle pain. |
| *Cucurbita pepo, C. maxima, C. mixta, C. moschata* (squash, pumpkin, gourd, calabaza) | Research suggests Mesoamericans began cultivating squash some 8,000-10,000 yrs. ago. | In most U.S. growing zones, squash is a climbing or ground spreading annual, though there are perennial species in the tropics. Most squash plants need a minimum of 6 hours of full sun to thrive. | As a member of the Three Sisters planting scheme, the squash provides ground cover to limit weeds while the corn supported climbing beans. The beans fix nitrogen for all three. Squash is a highly nutritious fruit that is usually cooked. |
| *Eriobotrya japonica* (loquat, níspero) | The loquat is native to south-central China. It has been in Japan for over 1,000 years (hence its scientific name). The Columbian Exchange brought the tree to the Americas. | An evergreen tree reaching about 20-30’ high and 15’ wide. Very fragrant flowers. Prefers full sun to light shade. | Called níspero throughout Latin America, the tree is widely planted by farmers in rural areas for its sweet, delicious, plum-sized fruit, eaten raw or cooked. |
| *Manihot esculenta* (cassava, yuca) | Likely Amazon basin indigenous domestication some 8,000-10,000 yrs. ago. | A perennial shrub. We cannot grow this humid tropical plant in GA. We do grow *Manihot grahamii* to demo cassava but this perennial is highly toxic and inedible. Full sun. | Edible starchy roots. After rice and corn, cassava is the 3rd largest source of carbohydrates worldwide. Also used to feed livestock. |
| *Musa* spp. (banana, plátano, guineo) | Earliest domestication in Papua New Guinea some 7,000 yrs. ago. In 1500s Portuguese colonists started banana plantations in Brazil. Soon also found in Jamaica and other Caribbean islands. | An herbaceous plant that requires full sun. We grow a freeze-tolerant variety in the UGA Latin American Garden (*Musa basjoo*) that dies to ground each year but reaches 20+ ft. in a season. The fruit is not edible. | Edible banana is the number one export commodity in Ecuador, Panama—top three in Costa Rica, Guatemala and Honduras. Some species of banana used for fiber to make mats, baskets, and even paper. |
| *Phaseolus* spp. (beans, frijoles). Includes common beans, scarlet runner beans, lima beans, etc. | Domesticated throughout pre-Columbian Americas between 7,000-10,000 yrs. ago. | Annual, both shrubby and climbing varieties. All require at least 4-5 hours of sun daily. | Important food crop and element of the 3-Sisters planting scheme (beans, corn, squash). |
| *Physalis philadelphica* and *Physalis ixocarpa* (Mexican husk tomato, tomatillo) | Native to Mesoamerica but concentrated uses especially in Mexico and highlands of Guatemala. | An annual, plant all but last 1/3 of stem in soil to ensure good rooting. Plant a minimum 2-3 together to ensure pollination. Sun. | Very important ingredient to salsas or salads in Mexico and Guatemala. The small .5–1” fruits can also be eaten raw. |
| *Piper auritum* (Mexican pepperleaf, rootbeer plant, hoja santa) | Native range from Mexico and Central America to Colombia. | A spreading herbaceous perennial with large, heart-shaped leaves that reach approx. 3’ high, does well in full sun and partial shade. | Heavily used throughout Mexico and Guatemala to wrap tamales, meats and vegetables and as an ingredient of mole verde. Leaves have strong black licorice scent that flavors food when steamed. A tea from the leaves said to alleviate cough and fever. |
| *Poliomentha longiflora* (Mexican oregano) | Native to northern Mexico (the states of Coahuila and Nuevo León) and the southwestern U.S. | The plant is a bushy perennial that typically grows 3’-4’ tall and wide. Prefers full sun and once established is drought tolerant. | Commonly used in northern Mexico as a spicy oregano-like substitute. Both its tubular lavender flowers that bloom all summer and its leaves are edible. This is another butterfly favorite! |
| *Salvia apiana* (white sage, sacred sage, salvia blanca) | Found is arid to semi-arid regions of the U.S. SW and northern Mexico. | A perennial shrub preferring full sun. Mature plants reach 3-4’ high and the same in width. Strongly aromatic leaves. | The seed is a primary ingredient of pinole (a stable food of some indigenous groups that includes ground corn). The smoke of dried leaves used in traditional healing (smudging). Teas have antibiotic properties. |
| *Salvia elegans* (pineapple sage, mirto, hierba del burro) | Native to the highland pine-oak forests (5,900’ -8,800’) of southern Mexico and Guatemala. The plant has likely been used by Mesoamericans for thousands of years. | An herbaceous perennial that dies to the ground each winter, returning in Spring. The plant does best in partial shade. Normal mature size is approximately 3’ x 3’. | Red tubular flowers and leaves are edible and used in salads, having a sweet, pineapple scent. A tea made from the leaves is used to treat anxiety, depression, and high blood pressure. The plant in flower is a hummingbird and butterfly favorite. |
| *Solanum lycopersicum L.* (tomato, tomate) | Cherry-sized tomatoes developed about 80,000 years ago, Mesoamericans domesticated those some 7,000 yrs. ago. | An annual now comprising over 10,000 cultivars. Numerous sizes, all require 7-8 hrs. full sun. | The world’s most highly cultivated vegetable, eaten raw, cooked, made into beverages, etc. |
| *Spilanthes acmella* (toothache plant, jambu, buzz buttons, berro del Pará) | Native origin not clear but believed to have come from the Amazon basin. | A small annual reaching about 1’ high and 12’ wide, the plant does best in full sun. | A fascinating plant— consuming a flower head and, to a lesser extent, the leaves, leads within seconds to a short-lasting numbing effect in the mouth (2-3 min). Used often in traditional medicine for toothache or generalized mouth pain. |
| *Stevia rebaudiana* (sweet leaf, hierba dulce) | Used for over 1,500 yrs. by the Guaraní of Paraguay and Brazil. | Considered a tender perennial, the plant typically reaches1.5-2’ high. Full sun to partial shade. | The plant is used to sweeten yerba mate tea, a traditional caffeinated drink. Plants typically are 200-300x sweeter than sugar and considered a healthier alternative. |
| *Tagetes lucida* (Mexican tarragon, pericón) | Native to southern Mexico and Guatemala. The Aztec used the leaves to flavor the drink chocolatl. Leaves also used by the Aztec as a ritual incense. | A perennial, compact shrub about 2’ x 2’ and slow spreading that dies to ground in winter, returning in spring. Full sun. | A tea made from the leaves used to effectively treat stomach pain, diarrhea. Leaves used in soups and sauces. Crushed leaves have strong anise scent and flavor. |
| *Yucca* spp. | There are about 50 species ranging primarily from the U.S. SW, Mexico, Guatemala and parts of the Caribbean. Indigenous peoples throughout the Americas have used numerous species for thousands of years. | The genus includes perennial shrubs and tree forms. *Yucca filamentosa* is a dependable species grown as an ornamental but with numerous ethnobotanical uses. The plant requires full sun and is drought tolerant. | In many species (including *Y. filamentosa*), plant leaves are used to make twine, baskets, mats, etc., the flowers and fruits are edible, the cooked flower stalk is also eaten. Roots are used to make a soap substitute. |
| *Zea mays* (corn, maize, maíz) | Domesticated by indigenous Mesoamericans some 10,000 yrs. ago. | A tender annual in the grass family that can grow from 4-12’ high, depending on variety. Plant corn in full sun. | Corn is the second most cultivated crop in the world. It is also an element of the Three Sisters planting scheme (beans, corn, squash). |

Note: In the table above, mention was made several times of Mesoamerica or Mesoamericans. The National Geographic has a wonderful resource library that includes historical and current information about the region. As noted on their Mesoamerica page, *“The historic region of Mesoamerica comprises the modern-day countries of northern Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Belize, and central to southern Mexico. For thousands of years, this area was populated by groups such as the Olmec, Zapotec, Maya, Toltec, and Aztec peoples. Cultural traits that define the region include the domestication of maize, beans, avocado, and vanilla, and a common architectural style.”* The National Geographic’s Mesoamerica content pages are found [here](https://www.nationalgeographic.org/topics/resource-library-mesoamerica/?q=&page=1&per_page=25).

For those looking for a short primer on the impacts (good and bad) related to the Columbian Exchange, [this video](https://www.yout-ube.com/watch?v=HQPA5oNpfM4) may be of interest.