



Urban Harvest

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Growing Ginger, Galangal and Turmeric

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Houstonians have been growing ornamental gingers for a long time, but only a few have attempted some of the culinary gingers. This is a shame because culinary gingers are not only easy to grow but can be quite striking in an ornamental bed. There are many gingers in the family Zingiberaceae that are either edible, medicinal, or used in the fragrance or dye industry. The following will cover three major gingers: galangal, turmeric, and traditional ginger.

Galangal, *Alpinia galangal*, is native to Java and is most commonly associated with Thai cuisine. Turmeric, *Curcuma longa*, is native to South East Asia and is more often associated with Indian cooking and culture. The rhizome is not only used to flavor and add color to curries but it is used as a dye during festivals. Traditional ginger *Zingiber officinale*, is known throughout most of the world and is considered to be one of the oldest spices. It is mentioned in ancient texts like the writings of Confucius and The Quoran.

To get starter plants, purchase healthy rhizomes of ginger at a grocery store. Galangal and turmeric can be found at Asian and international grocery stores. Some of my favorites are Hong Kong Market Grocery on Bellaire and Than Hung Market in Spring Branch. Sometimes these gingers are available at the International Fiesta on Blalock. Avoid rhizomes that are moldy, squishy, or shriveled. They may produce leaves but may not be healthy enough to produce a harvest before winter.

Determine how much space you have available. The turmeric plant is fairly large, reaching 4 feet in height and has a growth similar to cannas. Its ornamental beauty makes it a candidate for growing in a flower bed. Galangal is tall, easily reaching six to seven feet, and looks like ornamental shell ginger. Traditional ginger is the scraggiest, but its growth allows it to be planted densely in a traditional vegetable bed. It rarely reaches more than three feet in height.

To grow traditional ginger you can purchase rhizomes as early as February. Cut them in 3 inch sections and store on a flat basket in the cupboard until they sprout. Larger pieces of rhizome will produce larger hands by winter.

If you are planting galangal, it can store in the refrigerator for a week or two before you need to put it in the ground. It is best to plant whole rhizomes instead of breaking it up into smaller pieces. Larger pieces of rhizome will produce larger hands by winter. Turmeric comes in rhizomes that look like fingers. I plant individual fingers. If you are limited in space, plant the larger pieces first.

Rhizomes should be planted in late March to May. Soil temperatures will determine their germination rate. If you plant them too early the combination of cold wet soil may rot them. If you plant late, they will sprout quickly but may not have enough warm season to produce a harvest in the fall.

If you plant in late March there is a possibility that the rhizome will sit dormant in the ground for a month. If there is a concern that your ginger rotted, carefully dig the area. If the ginger looks healthy, leave it alone. For this reason it will be important to label the area you planted so that you and other gardeners know exactly where they were planted.

All gingers will prefer raised beds with enriched sandy loam soil. They will tolerate heavier soils, but harvesting will take longer and be messier. Many people grow edible gingers in full sun with good results, but leaves may be pale compared to ginger grown in lower light. I have only observed this with the traditional ginger. The plants also seem to grow in shade but rhizome production may be lower. At planting time place a small handful of organic fertilizer in the hole. After that, it is only necessary to use mulch. If it is summer or fall and your plants seem stunted, add a little compost.

Because galangal is a huge plant with a huge rhizome what is planted this spring will not be ready for harvest until the following winter. I treat this plant as a perennial and leave a few sections in the ground to over-winter. Mulch heavily during cooler months. Traditional ginger can be grown like an annual. Plant it in spring and harvest it in November.

Turmeric can also be grown as an annual. I have seen no advantage to letting it over-winter in the garden other than it will come up the following year. Plants that have come up from the previous year have not had noticeably higher or quicker production.

Harvesting a few of the gingers can be time consuming. Traditional ginger is by far the easiest and cleanest operations. Turmeric is a little more challenging with the clean up being more time consuming. Galangal requires a shovel and possibly a saw.

The family Zingiberaceae contains many other significant gingers that are worth trying. Here are three: cardamom *Elettaria cardomomum*; zedoary *Curcuma zedoaria*; and abir *Hedychium spicatum*. Cardamom is from Indonesia. The seed pods are commonly used as a spice in Indian cooking. Originally from North-Eastern India, zedoary is used as a medicinal, an essential oil and as a spice.

