

Anyone Growing African Blue Basil?

by Al Chomica

African Blue Basil is an unusual type of basil in that it is a perennial. It is a sterile, hybrid cross of two other breeds of basil, unable to produce viable seeds of its own, and is propagated by cuttings.



We had never heard of a perennial basil until we bought one from Outrageous Edibles three years ago, for \$2.99. There are literally dozens of basil varieties available and we also grow two other kinds but every year that one little plant has produced ample crops

for us. It grows in a big pot and is a mature specimen with a woody trunk. It comes indoors during the winter and provides us with fresh leaves and cuttings. The leaves are almost as aromatic as the Genovese Basil yet they are more sturdy. The flowers are extremely abundant and attract more bees, and for a longer period of time, than almost any other flowering plant in our yard.



It is also a very showy plant and by mid summer the 'blue' veins are very pronounced. One plant this year grew almost three feet across and was huge.

But just because it is a perennial doesn't mean it can take freezing temperatures. If left outside over winter, it would die so it must either be grown in a pot or repetitive cuttings must be rooted to ensure this plant continues to grow.

In late August, I will pinch off a couple branches from the mature mother plant and just throw them in a glass of water and put them in a south facing window. They easily root within a week or two and then they can be planted in a pot to keep in the house. The problem with this is the limited amount of daylight hours we get during winter and the plants can get spindly and weak.

In January we seed our onion crops in flats under a plant stand that has lights. The basil has rooted by this time and is searching for light to grow with. We will allow the basil to get a bit of light from the onion lights and it will start to pick up. If you had aphids in your house, this is the time they would discover your basil and try to suck the life out of it, so the plants need to be watched over and protected.

Last year our potted basil was two years old and we brought it in and gave it some light every day alongside some hard-to-root kiwi cuttings. Because the basil plant was taller than the other plants under the lights, we simply put the pot on its side and it grew like crazy as in the image below. At this point this plant has been on its side for about three months and is ready for a trim. The trimmed leaves can be either placed in a glass of water to make more cuttings or used for culinary purposes. Aside from eating the leaves fresh in salads, Herbes de Provence and Basil Pesto are two primary concoctions that we prepare from this aromatic herb. We also use whole limbs from plants as an herbal infusion for tomato sauce, but that is another story.



After a haircut the plant looks like this (above). It will be placed on its side in the flat again until the end of February when it will be cut up into cuttings yet again to prepare for the next generation that will be planted outside in the garden in April or May.

At time of writing in early November, we have already had some cold, wet weather and a frost that has caused our Red Rubin and Genovese Basil plants to die overnight. The Blue Basil in our raised bed however still has a couple leaves we can harvest for salads and one flower is still blooming. There is a joke among basil growers that a basil plant will shudder and lose all its leaves if it even hears a cold weather forecast. They do not do well in the cold, but the African This African Blue Basil is truly a plant of worth that we just can't seem to get enough of –