

Growing Rosella

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Its Money for Jam

Want a guaranteed best seller at the local school fete? In many parts of the country, rosella is a pretty safe bet. Rosella jam, jelly, tea, cordial, seeds or seedlings – once word gets round, you'll be sold out in no time!

Rosella is a curious plant. Although a bridesmaid by comparison, there is no denying its botanical relationship to the more flamboyant ornamental hibiscus. But rather than the flower, it is the fleshy red calyx that surrounds a prominent green seedpod that gardeners and cooks prize.



FACT FILE

Botanical Name: *Hibiscus sabdariffa*

Common Name: *Rosella, roselle or rozelle*

Family: *Malvaceae*

Origin: *Tropical Africa, although records indicate that it has been cultivated in India and parts of the Pacific for centuries.*

Climatic Range: *Rosella grows across a wide climate range from arid, dry temperate regions through subtropical and tropical regions.*

Planting: *Rosella requires a growing season of up to six months. It is planted in spring or at the onset of warm weather in most regions, but grows best during the dry season in tropical climates.*

Rosella is a very versatile plant. Not only is the succulent calyx used for making jams and sauces, they are also dried to make tea. The flowers are edible and the petals make an attractive addition to summer salads. The tender young leaves may be cooked as spinach and fibre from the stems may be used as a substitute for jute.

Fast and Furious

This short-lived shrub is fast and furious, growing to almost 2m in height in just a few months. It prefers warm temperatures and moderately rich, well drained soil. Plants reach maximum productivity in their first growing season, but can be pruned to achieve an early, although less substantial harvest in their second year in subtropical climates.

The deep red stems and prominently veined leaves are sufficiently attractive to warrant planting as an ornamental. The pale yellow hibiscus flowers have a maroon throat, but often last less than a day. After flowering, the distinctive red calyx forms around the large seedpod.

Sourcing Seed

Rosella seed can be hard to find in mainstream seed catalogues, but seed saver networks, non-hybrid seed stockists and organic growing groups typically carry stocks. Nurseries often have seedlings in late spring and early summer.

Seeds retain good viability and germinate readily when temperatures are warm. Soaking the small, hard triangular seeds in warm water prior to sowing speeds germination.



Six plants should provide a sufficient harvest for jam or tea making. Allow a minimum of one square metre of growing space for each plant.

First Flush

While the initial harvest is meager, it is important to remove the first flush of seedpods. These can be dried for tea making or frozen for later use in jams and sauces. Removing seed pods that form early in the season helps to promote further flowering and an improved harvest. Pruning out the tips of developing plants will also encourage branching and promote increased fruit production.

The fleshy pods are best removed when they can be picked easily from the bush by hand. This will ensure that the flesh remains young and flavoursome. As the seedpods mature they become tough and stringy.

Beware Root Rot

Rosella is not troubled by many pest or disease problems. Leaf eating beetles occasionally feed on the foliage, but this does not significantly affect the fruit harvest. Root rot disease does cause concern, but is primarily associated with poorly drained soil. Plants typically grow well initially, but suddenly wilt as if lacking water. There is no satisfactory control for affected plants. Build up the soil with organic matter, plant into raised beds or otherwise improve the drainage in the growing area to prevent this disease occurring.

Seed Saving

Saving seed from rosella is easy. Simply allow the seed pods to mature to the point where they become dry, split and begin to shed their seeds. Weevils commonly infest seed stocks. Mix a little diatomaceous earth with stored seeds or place seeds in glass jar and freeze for 24 hours prior to long term storage. Seeds retain viability for many years.

Weed Worry

Rosella has escaped and propagated itself with such efficiency that it has achieved weed status and become naturalized in disturbed wasteland areas and some creeks and river edges in northern areas of Western Australia and many parts of the Northern Territory. Plants flower during the dry season months of May, June and July, with the dry pods shedding copious quantities of seed in the months that follow. Avoid contributing to further spread of rosella by ensuring that any plants not used for seed saving are removed as soon as you complete your harvest.

Quick Rosella Jam

To make my recipe for rosella jam you will need 1/2 bucket freshly picked rosellas, 3-4 cups sugar, one or more chopped green apples and a little water and lemon juice (not Meyer variety as it contains insufficient pectin)

Making rosella jam typically involves separating the red fleshy calyx from the central, green seedpod. This is slow and laborious, so the method outlined below avoids this step. Using more mature fruits can result in stringy jam, but this method also allows you to use all types of fruit because any tough or stringy pieces will be strained out.



Wash the rosella fruits thoroughly and place them and the peeled and chopped apple into a large, heavy based saucepan. Add about one cup of water, put the lid on the pot and leave to simmer. Your aim is to allow the flesh to separate from the green seedpods without splitting the pods open and releasing the tiny white seeds inside. Strain the hot mixture through a colander or sieve, making sure that the holes are small enough to keep the seeds that break out of the seed pods, separated from the jam.

Measure or estimate the number of cups of rosella/apple pulp you have and add an equal amount of sugar. Add the juice of one lemon and cook until the sugar is dissolved and the jam well set. Removing any froth that forms on the top of the jam will give a clearer result.

Rosella Cordial

To make rosella cordial simply change the proportions of rosella fruit and water. Add six to eight cups of water to the above quantities, keeping the proportion of sugar the same. Simmer until the mix shows a good strong colour. Strain through a cloth and bottle while still hot. Dilute with water, soda water or champagne to the required strength before consuming. For an added decorative treat, gently poach small, deseeded rosella calyxes in a sugar syrup. Allow to cool, then place single rosella in the base of a champagne glass and top with your favourite bubbly.

Rosella Tea

Wash and pat dry freshly harvested rosella fruit. Separate the red calyx from its seedpod. Discard the seed. Dry the fleshy calyx by laying on trays in a warm position out of direct sunlight, in a solar drier, electric fruit dryer or a low oven. Store in a clean, dry glass container in a dark cupboard. Add the dried calyx to a cup or teapot and pour over boiling water. Allow to infuse for several minutes. Sweeten with honey if desired.

Did You Know?

Red Zinger

Rosella is a primary ingredient of Red Zinger tea.

Native Rosella

Hibiscus heterophyllus is commonly known as the native rosella. Native to coastal NSW and Queensland, it has edible flowers and foliage.