



Herb Gardening

General Culture

Plant herbs in sunny locations that have well-drained soil. Use composted pine bark soil conditioner to help improve poorly drained soils or build up raised beds or berms to facilitate drainage. Most herbs will grow very successfully in containers, as well.

Be skimp with the fertilizer when it comes to most herbs. Too much fertilizer will grow lush plants with lots of foliage but will compromise the delicate flavors and aromas. Side dressings of good compost once or twice a season or occasional light fertilizing with a half strength solution should suffice. Your plants will be smaller but flavor will be better. Basil is one exception and does benefit from regular, light fertilizing.

Herbs that are grown so that their leaves may be used for culinary uses, such as basil and oregano, should have flower buds removed before they form flowers. This will keep annuals from going to seed and help direct the plant's energy into producing leaves. If you wish to save seed for replanting, allow late season flowers to develop.

Common Culinary Herbs

Basil - Basil is an annual that thrives in heat and sun and likes a rich, moist soil. Use sweet basil for pesto and Italian cuisine. Thai basil is best for Thai and Vietnamese dishes. Greek Column basil has the very convenient trait of not going to seed saving gardeners from having to constantly pinch it.

Bay laurel - Grow in sun in a rich, well-drained soil. In our area, bay is best grown in pots so that it may be moved indoors on freezing winter nights or against a protected south facing wall. Pick older leaves for best flavor.

Bergamot - a.k.a "Bee Balm". Can be used in teas for flavor. Plant in full sun to part shade in rich, humusy soil. Produces clusters of scarlet, pink, lavender, or white flowers.

Chervil - Light anise flavor works well in fish dishes and soup. Prefers moist, well-drained, humusy soil. Plant in full sun to light shade. Chervil loses flavor quickly in heat, so add it at the end of a recipe.

Chamomile (Roman) - Apple-scented foliage is pleasant when walked on or brushed. Plant in full sun to part shade in light and moist but well-drained soil. Dried flowerheads make a soothing tea.

Chives - Multiple culinary uses such as mixed into butters or sauces, tossed in salads, or used as a topping. Flowers can be used as garnish or in salads, and are lovely added to champagne vinegar. Add at end of recipes as heat will destroy flavor. Plant in sun in rich, well-drained soil. Garlic chives can be grown and used in similar fashion. Harvest both from the outside, cutting to the base.

Cilantro/Coriander - Generally, called "cilantro" if the leaves are used and "coriander" if the seeds are used. This pungent annual herb is widely used in many cuisines particularly Chinese, Vietnamese, and Indian, and the leaves are great in fresh salsa and guacamole. Plant in sun to part shade in a moderately rich, well-drained soil. Look for Mexican "cilantro" which is not actually a cilantro but is another edible herb that tastes almost the same and is more heat tolerant for our summers.

Dill - Use leaves fresh with fish, eggs, seafood, butters, & sauces or salad dressings. Use flowerheads & small stems for pickling. Dill is a hardy annual best grown in full sun in a rich, well-drained soil. Attracts beneficial insects.

Fennel - Beautiful feathery leaves make fennel worth growing just for ornamental purposes. Fennel is often used in fish dishes, in certain Italian recipes, and the seed is the culinary anise used in many baking recipes. Attracts beneficial insects. Plant in full sun in humusy, well-drained soil.

Garlic - Plant individual cloves in October in full sun in deep, well-drained, humusy soil about 2 inches deep and 6 inches apart. Harvest in summer after tops have died down but before bulb skins begin to decay underground. Check the status of one head before digging up the whole crop.

Horseradish -This deep-rooted perennial does well in soil that is fertile and moist but well-drained. Plant in full sun. Usually available as bare roots. Harvest the spicy roots in late September through winter.

Lavender - All types available have highly fragrant foliage and flowers. Excellent for potpourri, sachets, and dried arrangements. Is edible and can be incorporated into baked goods and teas and jellies. Must have full sun, good air circulation, and excellent drainage. Does well in containers and appreciates a mulch of white gravel.

Lemon Balm - Lemon-scented leaves can be used fresh in fruit salads or dried for tea or sachets. Plant in full sun to part shade in any well-drained soil.

Lemon Grass - Essential for Thai recipes, this fragrant herb is grown as an annual here. Plant in full sun to part shade in a well-drained soil enriched with organic matter. It's normal for individual leaves to regularly die off and does not indicate a problem. Snip fresh foliage anytime as needed. Cut to the ground around Thanksgiving and winter it over in a pot in the garage or crawl

space watering only very rarely.

Marjoram - An aromatic herb with a mild oregano taste. Plant in sun in well-drained soil. Dried marjoram retains its flavor well and can be used as a substitute for oregano. It's also good in egg and potato dishes.

Mint - Mints are best planted in containers where their unruly and invasive habits can be controlled. Many flavors and varieties are available and can be used extensively in cooking and beverages. Excellent as a stomach-soothing tea. Refreshing as iced tea or a few sprigs in ice water. Try mint pesto on lamb, substituting the basil for mint. Plant in sun to part shade.

Oregano - A favorite in the herb garden for its popular uses in the kitchen particularly in Mexican, Greek, and Italian cooking. Plant in sun in well-drained, average garden soil.

Parsley - Plant in full sun to part shade. May be planted in pots to be brought indoors in the winter. Parsley is a biennial that's usually grown as an annual. Italian flat-leaf parsley has a more pungent flavor than the curly variety. Harvest from the outside, cutting to the base.

Rosemary - Delicious with meats, potatoes, stews, and breads, rosemary is a must in the kitchen garden. Plant in full sun to part shade in a light, well-drained soil. Grows well in containers. Upright forms tend to be more hardy than creeping types. If planting creepers, make sure drainage is good to prevent winter rot.

Sage - Many varieties are available from sweet pineapple sage to the delicious common sage wonderful in cooking as well as beautiful ornamental sages for the garden. 'Bergarten' is one of the best culinary sages for Southern gardens as it is good at resisting fungal invasion. Plant in sun to part shade in well-drained soil.

Tarragon - True tarragon produces sterile seeds so buy transplants not seeds if you want to grow culinary tarragon. Great with fish, chicken, eggs, salad dressings, sauces & vinegars. Texas "tarragon" (from the marigold family) offers very similar tarragon-like flavor but with much more heat tolerance. Plant in full sun to partial shade in well-drained soil.

Thyme - English thyme is excellent for culinary use such as in poultry dishes, with other meats, and soups. Lemon thyme is good with fish or chicken, and is absolutely fantastic minced up incorporated into the top layer of lemon bars. Plant in full sun in well-drained soil.

Harvesting

Herbs that are harvested for their leaves have the greatest concentration of essential oils just before flower buds open. This is a good time to cut off flower buds in order to direct the plant's energy to producing leaves and not flowers. It is also an ideal time to harvest leaves for storage. If you are harvesting herbs for flowers such as borage, calendula, chives, and chamomile, harvest when plants are in full bloom. Herbs harvested for seeds, such as coriander or dill should be harvested after the seeds have turned from green to brown.

Be sure to use sharp scissors or shears to harvest herbs. If you're collecting leaves, cut whole stems with leaves attached rather than just cutting leaves. The best time of day to harvest herbs is in the morning when the concentration of essential oils is highest.

Drying

Most herbs dry easily. Some gardeners claim that summer grown and dried herbs have better flavor than herbs grown indoors over winter. The best location for drying herbs is a dark place that is well-ventilated such as a dry attic or garage. Herbs dried this way can be spread out on screens or hung in bunches, using rubber bands to accommodate shrinking stems, from wire hangers. Stir the herbs drying on screens around once a day for even drying. They should dry in 7 to 10 days. A gas oven with a pilot light on is another good spot for drying herbs. Set herbs in a single layer on baking sheets lined with paper towels. To speed up the process you can set the oven temperature to about 100°F and stir the herbs about once every half hour. For best results, dry only one type of herb or herbs with similar leaves in each batch to ensure uniform drying. Remove the herbs from the oven once they are crispy-dry and before they turn brown. You can try a dehydrator machine for quick & convenient drying.

Prepare herbs seeds for drying by blanching them to remove unseen pests that may be hidden inside. This is only necessary if you are planning on consuming the seeds rather than planting them. Place the seeds in a sieve over the sink and pour boiling water over them. Spread them on paper or mesh screens to dry in the sun. Once they are dry, they can be stored in an airtight container.

Storing

Dried herbs should be stored in airtight containers. Glass jars with suction lids or mason jars with rubber seals are ideal. Resealable plastic bags with the excess air squeezed out also work well. Some herbs will also freeze well. Good candidates for freezing are basil, dill, parsley, oregano, marjoram, mint, fennel, thyme, lemongrass, and chervil. Wash and pat dry herbs. Chop them into the desired size and lay flat in a resealable plastic bag that has been labeled. Squeeze out the air and seal. Store in the freezer until ready to use. A great way to store herbs for soups or stews and certain recipes is to puree them in water or oil and pour the mixture into ice cube trays. Once frozen, pop out the herb cubes and place them in labeled resealable freezer bags. Basil stores well when pureed into oil (try olive oil) & then frozen. It will also keep this way stored in jars for some time in the refrigerator. Add an extra layer of oil over the top to seal out air. This is a great way to store basil that will be used later for pesto.