

FALL IS FOR HERBS

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Herbs are plants that are used as flavoring agents. The common herbs used in cooking are referred to as culinary herbs. Mild or savory herbs impart a delicate flavor to food while the stronger or pungent herbs add zest to foods. These herbs are attractive and varied so their ornamental value is also important.

The ornamental value of herbs enables them to be used in flower beds, borders, rock gardens, or corner plantings. Some herbs are annuals while others are perennial or come up year after year. You can locate annual herbs in your annual flower garden or vegetable garden. The perennial herbs should be located at the side of the garden where they won't interfere with next year's soil preparation.

Care for the herb garden will be similar to your vegetable or flower garden. Select a sunny, well-drained location. Apply a slow-release fertilizer at the rate of 2 pounds per 100 square feet.

Water as necessary during dry periods. Generally, you need about one inch of water per week, if not supplied by natural rainfall. A mulch will help conserve soil moisture and reduce weed growth as well. The mints prefer moist soil so they will require more frequent watering.

Annual and biennial herbs can be established by planting the seed directly in the garden or starting seeds indoors for later transplanting to the garden. You can save seed produced by the herb plants for next year's crop or obtain seed from your local garden center or seed catalog.

To save your own seed, harvest the entire seed head after it has dried on the plant. The seeds should then be allowed to dry in a protected location that is cool and dry. After the seeds are thoroughly dry, thresh the seed from the seed heads and discard the trash. Store in labeled jars in a dark, cool, dry location.

Some herb seeds such as dill, anise, caraway, or coriander can be used for flavorings.

Perennial herbs can be propagated by cuttings or by division. Divide plants every 3 to 4 years in the early spring. The plants should be dug up and cut into several sections. You can also cut 4 to 6 inch sections of the stem and root these by placing the cuttings in moist sand in a shady area. In 4 to 8 weeks, roots should form on these cuttings. Herbs such as sage, winter savory, and thyme can be propagated by cuttings. Chives, lovage, and tarragon can be propagated by division of the roots or crowns.

Leaves of many herbs such as parsley and chives can be harvested for fresh seasonings. On these plants you can gradually remove some of the leaves as you need them. Don't remove all the foliage at one time. These plants will produce over a long period of time if they are cared for well.

On rosemary and thyme, clip the tops when the plants are in full bloom. Usually, leaves and flowers are harvested together. Basil, fennel, mint, sage, summer savory, sweet marjoram, tarragon, and winter savory are harvested just before the plant starts to bloom.

Chervil and parsley leaves can be cut and dried anytime. Lovage leaves should be harvested early during the first flush of growth.

After harvesting, hang the herbs in loosely tied bundles in a well-ventilated room. You can also spread the branches on a screen, cheesecloth, or hardware cloth. For herbs where leaves only are needed, the leaves can be spread on flat trays. Keep dust off the herbs by a cloth or similar protective cover that will allow moisture to pass through.

Many of the herbs we grow today are from the Mediterranean region of the world and thus hot, dry summer weather suits them perfectly. All too often gardeners lose herbs because they don't have good enough drainage (they really do best in a raised bed) or because they don't have them in the right exposure. Most require sun. The mints and a few other herbs will grow well in shade or partial shade.

Following is a list and description of some commonly used, adapted herbs for this area:

BASIL - This is one of the easiest of all herbs to grow. It is a rather strong herb, but one that is delightful when chopped fine and mixed with butter. In addition to the standard green forms, there's a purple-leafed basil and a lemon-scented basil. Basil is quite tender so at the first sign of frost you can expect to lose it.

CAMOMILE - This herb makes one of the best of all herbal teas. There are two varieties. English and German camomile. The dried blossoms of either can be used to make tea. You'll need to experiment with the amount you want to use, but try pouring boiling water over about one tablespoon for each cup desired and then filter this through a tea strainer after it has steeped for about 10 to 15 minutes.

CATNIP - Is an interesting herb to grow, especially if you have cats. The cats like to roll all over the catnip as well as any surrounding plants, so you'll probably find it's best to grow this herb in a hanging basket. Although it is sometimes used to make a hot tea, catnip's main attribute seems to be known only by cats.

COMFREY - Comfrey is a rank-growing herb with large "donkey-ear" leaves that remind one of green sandpaper. It has been promoted as being high in protein and an excellent foodstuff, but unfortunately, it's hard to find a suitable way to eat it. It is widely used as a tea made either from the leaves or from the roots.

LEMON BALM - Is a member of the mint family and it can be a very rank growing plant. The leaves have a strong lemon odor and make a delightful tea or they can be used to flavor regular teas. Because of its extreme vigor, it's probably best to grow this plant in a confined bed area or in containers.

MARJORAM and OREGANO - These herbs are quite similar, although marjoram is considered the milder of the two. They're both easy to grow and can be used year round. Except in an extreme winter, they look better in the fall and winter than in mid-summer when the growth begins to slow. Oregano is the familiar herb in pizzas and one plant would make a lot of pizzas.

MINTS - There are many mints. Spearmint is one of the most popular and the easiest to grow. Peppermint is more difficult to grow. There's a pineapple mint, an apple mint, an orange mint (this is so vigorous it soon becomes a weed) and many variations of these basic fragrances. All mints appreciate moisture and do best where they get afternoon shade. A good place to plant spearmint is at the base of a downspout.

ROSEMARY - Rosemary comes in many forms from a bush that grows up to four feet tall to a low-growing groundcover variety. The fragrance is rather strong but rosemary is typically used with many meat dishes, especially chicken. One good idea is to use a cut sprig of rosemary to dip into barbecue sauce and then brush it on

chicken.

This is a sampling of the many herbs that can be grown in this area. Parsley, chervil and chives are best planted in the fall for winter growth.

Basil - Many varieties and flavors available. Most common is Sweet Green Basil. More unusual varieties are Lemon, Cinnamon, Licorice, Globe, Purple Ruffled, Japanese Sawtooth, Holy, Cuban, and Thai. Not all are used in cooking. Basil is the herb to use in all tomato dishes. Add fresh chopped leaves to vinegar, crushed garlic and olive oil to make an excellent dressing for sliced tomatoes. Add to pork, roast chicken, scrambled eggs, eggplant and squash dishes. Easy to grow from seed.

Chamomile - Available as dried flowers known as Manzanilla from Fiesta Spices. Makes an effective tea to calm the nerves. Add lemon and sweeten with honey to hide the bitter taste. Easy plant to grow from seed available at nurseries. Tea can be used as a hair rinse. Roman Chamomile is a low growing ground cover.

Catnip - One of the mints, it can affect cats many ways, some love it, some hate it, few ignore it. Makes a calming tea for humans. Best grown from transplants. Grow in hanging baskets to keep curious felines out.

Chives - Smallest member of the onion family. Chives are easily grown from seed or transplants. Use any way you would onions. Perfect topping with sour cream for baked potatoes. Add to cottage cheese, omelets, sauces, and garnish for almost any dish.

Coriander - Also known as Cilantro or Chinese Parsley. Well known in this area for the use of the leaves in Mexican cooking. Always available in the produce section. Leaves have a very strong "clean" flavor. Use only young leaves, the older ones are too strong. The seeds have a flavor similar to orange and are used in pastries, sausage, cooked fruit, and are an important ingredient in pickling spice and curry powder. Easily grown from seed and can sometimes be found growing wild in this area. Sow seeds every few weeks to have a steady supply of young leaves.

Dill - One of the easiest herbs to grow from seed. Will easily become a weed if seed heads are allowed to dry on the plant. Use in pickling, add to cottage or cream cheese, most vegetables, fish, and the dried seed can be added to bread dough for a caraway-like flavor. Add to vinegar used to make salad dressings. The large green caterpillars that love to eat dill will turn into swallowtail butterflies, so plant enough for you and them.

Lemon Balm - A member of the mint family. Can be started from seeds, cuttings or roots. Once established, it will spread and self-sow, so give it plenty of room. Use the fresh or dried leaves to make cold or hot teas. A good addition to fish dishes.

Marjoram - A woody cousin of Oregano with a more delicate, sweet flavor. There are several varieties and forms such as Sweet marjoram, Winter marjoram, Pot Marjoram, and Creeping Golden Marjoram. All forms can be used in cooking. Use marjoram in any dish you would use oregano or sage. Add to roasts, stews, stuffing, gravies, and spaghetti sauces. Great for roast pork and chicken. Best grown from transplants or root cuttings.

Mint - One of the hardiest and easiest herbs to grow. Grow from cuttings, roots or transplants. Can be grown from seed, but sometimes difficult. Mint comes in an almost endless variety of types -- Peppermint, Spearmint, "Mint-the-Best", Applemint, Grapemint, Watermint, Orange Bergamont Mint, Pennyroyal Curly Mint, Pineapple Mint, and on and on. Mint plants cross pollinate easily, so hybrids abound. Spearmint and peppermint are most commonly used as culinary herbs. Use to make teas -- both hot and cold -- add to green peas, make a sauce of mint leaves, vinegar and sugar to serve with roast lamb. Most mints are tough, hardy plants for this area.

Oregano - The name oregano is given to several unrelated plants that share the same or similar flavor. The most common two in this area is the Oregano used in Italian or Greek cooking which is a low spreading plant, *Origanum vulgare*. The other is a bushy shrub we call Mexican Oregano, *Lippia graveolens*, or *Lippia palmeri*. Both are available in local nurseries. Even the native common Doveweed is an excellent substitute for oregano. Oregano is a basic ingredient in Italian and Mexican cooking. It can be used to season all meats, stuffing, stews, soups, spaghetti sauce, and pizza. Leaves are best used dried.

Rosemary - A hearty, tough plant that thrives in our hot dry climate. Available as a landscape plant in nurseries. One of the oldest herbs known to man and has a long history of uses. There are many varieties and forms, all of which can be used in cooking. Rosemary is a natural for pork and poultry dishes. Use a branch of Rosemary as a basting brush for barbecued chicken. Place a few leaves on top of roasts or baked chicken. Rosemary is a strong herb.

Parsley - Without a doubt the most used and least eaten herb in the world. Millions of pounds are used to garnish everything and promptly thrown away. A shame because parsley is loaded with vitamins and minerals. Parsley comes in two forms, the flat leaved or Italian parsley, and the curled or French parsley. There are many hybrids of each available as seeds or transplants. Seed is slow to germinate, but worth the wait. Parsley can have problems with root maggots in this area. Parsley is a biennial, producing leaves the first year and flowers the next. Not only is parsley a garnish for any dish, it is excellent dipped in a batter and deep fried. Brown with butter and garlic for a sauce to baste grilled meats.

Sage - This is another herb that doubles as a durable landscape plant in this area. Very drought resistant; it can be killed by overwatering. Sage is best started from transplants or cuttings, but can be started from seed. There are many varieties of sage available, including Garden, Golden, Blue, Pineapple, Tri-color, and Clary. All can be used in cooking. Sage leaves should always be dried before using. Sage is a must in stuffing for poultry. Roast it with pork, add to butter and saute chicken in it. Goes well in egg and cheese dishes. Try a little crumbled dry sage over a bowl of blackeyed peas. Dried leaves will keep their flavor for years.

Thyme - With over 400 species available, this herb is another valuable plant to use in beds, rock gardens and as landscape accents. Varieties available locally include Common, Woolly, "Mother-of-Thyme", Lemon, English, Silver, and Golden. Thyme goes well in most meat dishes, poultry, fish, soups and vegetable dishes. Add a pinch of thyme to a tablespoon of honey and add to drained cooked carrots and onions. Thyme is a key herb used to make Cajun gumbo. Thyme, along with Sage, Rosemary, Marjoram, and Oregano should be considered the basics of every herb garden.