

It's Thyme to Try Herbs

Herbs have been used for centuries, but have never been more popular. Simply, an herb is a useful plant: that is, one that can be utilized for culinary, aromatic, medicinal, or other practical uses, e.g. dyes and insecticides. Herbs encompass a wide range of plants: herbaceous perennials, annuals and biennials, shrubs, trees, ferns, cacti, and mushrooms. Herb gardens range from a few pots on the windowsill to large English Tudor style Knot Gardens.

Herbs are easy to grow with a minimum of effort. Most thrive if given a sunny location, neutral pH, good drainage and good air circulation. However, there are exceptions. Angelica, sweet woodruff and ginseng prefer shady areas. Mints and Lovage grow well in moist soil. Generally herbs require little or no fertilizer, except for heavily harvested ones like basil, chives, and parsley. In fact, herbs grown in moderately rich soil are generally more flavorful. Excessive fertilization makes them grow large and rangy, with decreased concentration of the flavorful essential oils.

Herbs are propagated by a wide variety of methods depending on the individual plant. They may be raised from seed, cuttings, division or layering. Many herb gardeners start their seeds indoors to get a head start on the growing season. Do not start seed too early to avoid weak, spindly seedlings. Generally six to eight weeks prior to the last frost is sufficient time to plant your seeds. Although it is possible to start many perennial herbs from seed, it is usually more convenient to obtain small plants from local nurseries or propagate them from cuttings or root division, e.g., oregano and rosemary.

The selection of herbs you plant will depend on the size of your garden plot, the variety of herbs you select, or the specific theme of your garden, e.g. kitchen garden, aromatic garden, gray-green garden, etc. It might be well for the beginner to start with a few of the more common culinary herbs such as basil, oregano, thyme, chives, parsley, and sage. These herbs can be grouped together in an "herb garden", be incorporated into the overall landscape, or be included in your vegetable garden. Once you have mastered gardening with these herbs, add other herbs to your garden and don't be afraid to try various combinations. Many herbs are very attractive garden plants on their own, e.g. lavenders, rosemaries, oreganos, and are attractive when placed with other landscape plants. Herbs are also well suited to container gardening. A few pots with culinary herbs close to the kitchen ensure a supply of fresh herbs and are attractive additions to patios, entranceways and balconies. Herbs may also be grown indoors for a fresh supply of herbs in the winter. Basil, parsley, chives, oregano, summer savory, and marjoram can be grown in a sunny southern window.

Small amounts of most herbs can be harvested for fresh use almost anytime throughout the growing season. The ideal time to harvest herbs for drying and storing is just as the flower buds first appear because the leaves contain their maximum amount of essential oils. Herbs should be harvested in the morning, after the dew has dried but before the sun gets hot. The concentration of essential oils is highest at this time. When harvesting, cut just above the first joint of tender growth in order for the plant to send out new shoots. Avoid making large harvests of perennial herbs in late summer or early fall in order for new growth to harden and concentrate carbohydrates in preparation for winter.

Culinary herbs from your garden can be dried for winter use and are of better quality than store-bought herbs. When harvesting herbs to dry, spray the plant with water the day before cutting to remove dust and dirt from the leaves. The next morning, after the dew on the leaves has disappeared, harvest your herbs. The classic way to dry the herbs is simply hang the bunches upside down in a dry, well-ventilated area out of direct light. You can also dry the leaves on a cookie sheet or screen. Herb leaves are dry when they crumble into powder when rubbed between your fingers. Store the dry leaves in airtight containers. To conserve essential oils it is best to crush the herbs at the time you want to add them to your cooking.

THE KITCHEN HERB GARDEN	HERBS FOR CONTAINER GARDENS	POTPOURRI HERB GARDEN	HERBS de PROVENCE GARDEN
Basil	Basil	Coriander	Basil
Bay Laurel	Chives	Fennel	Fennel
Chives	Coriander	Lavenders	Lavender
Coriander	Lavender	Lemon Balm	Marjoram
Dill	Lemon Balm	Mints	Oregano
Lemon Grass	Marjoram	Old Roses	Rosemary
Marjoram	Mint	Oreganos	Sage
Oregano	Parsley	Pink Clove Dianthus	Summer Savory
Parsley	Rosemary	Rosemaries	Thyme
Rosemary	Sage	Sage	
Sage	Tarragon	Scented Geraniums	
Summer Savory	Thyme	Thymes	
Tarragon			
Thyme			

Bibliography

Books

Brown, Deni. *Herb Society of America Encyclopedia of Herbs and Their Uses*. 1995. An excellent detailed reference on herbs and their uses.

Bremnes, Lesley. *Herbs – Eyewitness Handbooks*. 1993. A handy resource for identifying herbs and researching their uses.

Mackin, Jeanne. *Cornell Book of Herbs and Edible Flowers*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell Cooperative Extension, 1993. Nice summary of the cultural requirements, propagation, and harvesting of herbs. This book is beautifully illustrated.

Guerra, Michael. *The Edible Container Garden*. 2000. Excellent book for use of herbs and vegetables in containers.

Web Sites

[eXtension – Your Extension Information Source](#). You can access the knowledge of Land Grant Universities around the nation.

[Arizona Master Gardener Manual Reference](#), Chap.10, pp 126–130. Nice chapter on Herbs: Selecting a site, Propagation, Harvesting, Drying and Uses.

[Arizona Master Gardener Manual Reference](#), Chap. 10, pp 47–54. Excellent section on indoor container gardening which includes herbs.

North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service Horticulture Information Leaflet 8110: [Growing Herbs For The Home Gardener](#). Has a very complete table showing growing requirements, propagation and use of herbs.

[University of Washington Medicinal Herb Garden](#). Good photographs of all the medicinal herbs in their garden.

North Carolina State University, Cooperative Extension. [Herbs](#). Fact sheets with good pictures and descriptions of the most common herbs.