
Rosemary

Rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*) is an attractive, drought tolerant perennial plant that should be part of everyone's landscape or herb garden. Rosemary is a member of the mint family (Labiatae) and comes from the Mediterranean region where it often grows on cliffs near the ocean. It is hardy to 10 degrees F as long as it has some time to slowly harden off in the fall. It survives Prescott, Arizona winters (USDA Hardiness Zone 7b). The cultivar 'Arp' can tolerate much colder weather, typically hardy down to Zone 6. The most common varieties have blue flowers and are either the prostrate growth form (1 to 2 feet in height) or the upright growth form (3 to 6 feet in height).

Rosemary can be grown from seed, but named cultivars grown by major nurseries are always grown from cuttings. When purchasing them, I often look for 4-inch pots in the herb section of the nursery. They should be planted in well-drained soil. The upright varieties make a good, informal evergreen hedge. If pruning is required, upright plants should be selectively pruned rather than sheared. Prostrate forms look best in cascading over masonry or rock walls or in rock gardens where the individual branches create interesting edge patterns. These can also be shaped easily by selective pruning.

Even though rosemary is "drought tolerant" it still needs some irrigation. Give plants frequent water (every 3 to 5 days) during the establishment phase and then decrease irrigation frequency once the plant has grown for a few months and the root system has expanded. Rosemary plants that survive the first year will usually live for a long time. Excessively irrigated plants can become very woody. Rosemary planted in native soil usually needs no supplemental fertilizer and minimal irrigation after establishment. May and June are the most critical months to maintain irrigation. After the monsoon season gets started, rosemary will not need supplemental water except for during very hot, droughty periods.

You may have noticed an emphasis on the health benefits of a Mediterranean diet lately in the media. Rosemary should be dried before use and a little goes a long way. To do this, cut a few branches in the morning, then hang them to dry in a ventilated area out of direct sunlight. Once it is dried, simply rub the branches to separate the leaves from the stem and store leaves in a sealed glass jar. Use as a flavoring herb for roasted fish, chicken, lamb, beef, game, in soups and stews, and on oven-roasted potatoes. Some say it is an effective insect repellent and browsing wildlife species are usually repelled by its pungency.. Note: the oil should not be taken internally.

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Adapted from original Backyard Gardener publications by Jeff Schalau, Agent, Agriculture & Natural Resources, University of Arizona Cooperative Extension, Yavapai County

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