
Herbs

The aromatic, medicinal and flavoring characteristics of herbs have been valued by cultures around the world for more than 4,500 years. Herbs are easy and rewarding crops that require nominal garden space. Herbs are also ideal for container gardening. Many can be easily grown from seed and/or cuttings and harvested, dried, and stored for year-round use.

Herbs can be grown in a kitchen garden or interspersed with your inedible landscape. If growing an herb garden, make sure perennials and biennials are planted separately from annuals to minimize disturbance of established plants. Select an area free of perennial weeds such as bermudagrass or field bindweed. Soil should be prepared the same as for annual flowers or vegetables, which is with ample composted organic matter and a moderate amount of nitrogen and phosphorus containing fertilizer (a soil test will provide guidance here). Drip systems or soaker hoses are ideal for irrigation. An organic mulch will cool the soil, minimize evaporation, and reduce weeds. Containers can be filled with peat-based potting soil (also called soilless mixes).

Each herb has an optimum time for harvest. Herbs such as oregano, thyme, rosemary, and sage are usually harvested for dried leaves. Parsley, tarragon, and basil leaves are often used when fresh. Dill, coriander, and fennel are grown for both leaves and seeds. Flowers such as calendula, chamomile, and lavender are dried for use in teas and sachets. For each situation, time your harvest to maximize the quality of the plant part being used. For instance, herbs harvested for dried leaves are often best prior to flowering.

Stems, flowers, and leaves can be tied together for curing in small bundles and hung upside down in a dry, shady location (such as a garage, shed, or kitchen) until dry. Leaves and flowers also can be dried in a shallow tray in the shade. Dry leaves and flowers can then be pulverized by rubbing them between the palms and fingers. These should be stored in airtight glass containers away from direct light. Seeds from plants such as coriander, anise and dill can be collected by placing the dry heads in a paper sack and separating the seeds by hand.

Sweet basil is an excellent herb for beginners. It grows quickly from seed and the fresh leaves can easily be made into delicious pesto. Classic pesto recipes usually consist of fresh basil leaves, olive oil, garlic, pine nuts (or walnuts), parmesan cheese, salt and pepper. Pasta with pesto is the perfect, quick summer meal. It can be frozen in small, meal-sized containers too. Thai basil is very tasty. It has an anise-like flavor and is often used in Thai red and green curries, in salads, or simply as an edible garnish. The plants have deep green leaves and purplish flower bracts. Seeds can be collected and plants grown the following year.

Coriander (also called cilantro) is another easy-to-grow herb. Fresh leaves are used in salsa and in Thai and Vietnamese foods. The dried, ground seeds are used as a seasoning in a variety of foods including Mexican, Indian curries, desserts, and Belgian-style wheat beers (called Wit which is Dutch for “white”). When growing for fresh leaves, watch it because it grows fast and can go to seed before you know it.

Dill is a robust and prolific plant (translate: it can take over the garden). Like parsley, it is a biennial flowering in the second year. Dill plants get big, so give them lots of room. The leaves can be used fresh or dried in salads, soups, fish, eggs, and potatoes. The fresh flowers are used in pickling cucumbers and green beans. The dried seeds are used as a flavoring in a wide variety of foods.

Herb aficionados have their own favorites and many books are available on culinary and medicinal herbs.

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