

## “Herb” Your Enthusiasm by Wende Gehrt

Gardeners have long valued herbs for their culinary uses and they’re easy to grow. An entire plant can be grown for lower cost than purchasing a pre-cut sprig at the grocery store and it will be available as you need it.

Most herbs don’t require special soils and can thrive in any spot in the yard, but can also be grown in pots or even on a windowsill. In the desert, the easiest herbs to grow are rosemary, mint, Italian parsley, Mexican oregano, cilantro, and basil. Lavender, dill, and sage will have a very short season in our climate, as they don’t tolerate the heat very well. As with vegetables, grow what you like to eat!

Rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*) can be grown in the ground or in pots and it can handle cold winter temperatures and scorching heat. Rosemary can be propagated simply by taking cuttings from existing plants and placing them in moist soil. Rosemary pairs well with pork, lamb and potatoes.

Mint (*Mentha spicata*) is a fast growing, spreading plant so you must give it a place to spread without getting in the way or plant it in a pot. Mint sends out runners that spread quickly forming large patches. Mint varieties include spearmint, peppermint, sweet mint, and chocolate mint. Fresh mint complements lamb, poultry, fish, and vegetables such as peas, new potatoes, and carrots. Mint is refreshing in tea or lemonade.

Italian parsley (*Petroselinum crispum*) is more heat tolerant than curly parsley and also has a richer flavor. Frequent cuttings benefit the plant and will produce new shoots. Parsley adds flavor to meat and egg dishes, potato and pasta dishes, rice, vegetables, salads, soups, and herb butters. Add chopped parsley at the very end of cooking or just before serving to preserve its fresh flavor.

Mexican oregano (*Poliomintha maderensis*) is more flavorful than its European cousin. It thrives in the alkaline soils we typically have in the Southwest. Mexican oregano enhances the flavor of fresh or cooked salsas, meat mixtures for burritos and tacos, enchilada sauce, and classic braised pork.

Cilantro (*Coriandrum sativum*) thrives in full sun, but will tolerate some shade. It’s best used fresh since it loses its flavor if dried. Fresh cilantro is delicious in sour cream, salsa, pico de gallo, salad dressings, soups, stews, rice, and many Mexican dishes. Some people have a variation of olfactory-receptor genes that allow them to perceive the aldehydes in cilantro as a “soapy taste”.

Basil (*Ocimum basilicum*) loves the sun and benefits from frequent cuttings, especially to remove any flower buds. It darkens after chopping so it should be added just at the end of cooking. Basil pairs well with Italian cuisine or anything tomato based.

For the best selection of herbs perfectly suited for our climate, purchase them locally.