

Herbs for the Home Garden

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Herbs have been enjoyed in the kitchen and home for thousands of years. Most herbs were originally used as medicines. Monasteries had huge herb gardens where the monks developed their knowledge of the herbs properties and used them to treat infections and illnesses. Some of the herb concoctions used we now know were quite toxic. Today most herbs are used for cooking though there is a resurgence in using herbs for medicinal and household uses again.

Some herbs have emerged as more popular than others such as chives and basil while other herbs enjoy trendier popularity such as cilantro. However, herbs are for anyone to enjoy and can be incorporated into any home recipe. Fresh herbs when available have the most nutritional benefits and the best flavor especially if picked just before being used.

Definition: The definition of an herb is rather vague basically being described as non-woody, seed-bearing plants that die back after flowering. However, there are many trees and shrubs that are considered herbs as well so this definition doesn't quite fit. To further complicate things there is also confusion about the differences between herbs and spices. Herbs tend to be the softer parts of a plant whereas spices are usually derived from the tougher parts of the plants such as roots, seed coats and bark (think cinnamon). Spices also tend to come from warmer parts of the world. So for this talk today my definition of an herb is a plant that we eat some part of be it the leaves, flowers or seeds.

Essential Oils: What makes herbs taste so great and such valuable additions to our meals? It is the presence of essential oils. Each herb secretes unique essential oils through specialized glands on the leaf surface. As the leaves heat up the oils vaporize into the atmosphere giving off their characteristic scent. This is why brushing against herbs on warm sunny days will surround you in a wonderful mix of aromas. Health food stores sell small vials of essential oils. These can not be used interchangeably with fresh herbs as the concentration of the oils is much higher than in fresh samples.

Growing Indoors Most herbs come from the Mediterranean region of the world where it is hot, sunny and dry. To grow herbs successfully indoors they need as much sun as possible during the day. East, South and West exposures are the best with the hotter exposures the best. They will grow slowly and may slow down during the shortest and coldest months of the winter but will come back once light levels increase. Windowsills are the most common spots to grow pots of herbs just be careful the leaves don't touch the glass and that the plants are not covered over with curtains or blinds. These will trap cold air and damage the plant. Remember to turn the plants ¼ turn every week to ensure even growth. Most herbs prefer to be on the drier side especially in the winter so let the soil dry

out between waterings. The exceptions will be basil, parsley and mint which will need regular watering but again let the top half inch of the soil dry out before watering again. Herbs do not need much fertilizer. Their flavours will be better if grown slightly stressed. Do not fertilize the plants until early March and then only with a half strength solution every month.

Pinching the plants back at leaf nodes or pruning off individual leaves should provide enough herbs for common use. If you use a lot of certain herbs it is better to have extra plants to harvest from. Some plants will tolerate indoor growing better than others such as parsley, sage, thyme, rosemary and mints. Not all herbs are perennial: Parsley is biennial, marjoram and basil are annuals so one season from summer through to the following spring is all that can be expected with annual herbs.

Cooking with Herbs: Until recently most fresh herbs were relegated to being used as garnishes to decorate meals at restaurants (think parsley). There are so many unique herbal flavors that add interest to food: Basil, oregano, parsley, marjoram are typical Italian flavourings; Cilantro is all the rage in many ethnic dishes; thyme, rosemary, sage and parsley are wonderful with poultry; and chervil, parsley, chives, mint and dill are wonderful with fish.

Because of the essential oils contained in herbs' leaves and stems excessive heat from cooking can spoil the oils causing them to vaporize and evaporate leaving little left for taste. Most herbs are best added right at the end of cooking allowing them to warm and release their oils directly into the food.

Herbs don't always need to be heated to add their essences to dishes. Fresh herbs incorporated into salads will add interesting flavors or chopped and sprinkled over cooked dishes such as stews, soups, rice, risotto or pasta dishes are wonderful.

Preserving Herbs

Herbal vinegars are a great way of preserving the flavors of herbs for later use. Combinations of herbs can be used to create great variations and add zest to your favorite dishes.

To make herbal vinegars: 1 cup of herb leaves and flowers to 2 cups vinegar (champagne, white or red wine or apple cider depending on the flavor desired). If dirty wash leaves gently then dry well. Bruise the leaves and place in clean sterile jars, cover with vinegar and seal. Keep in a warm dark room. Shake the jar every few days. After 2-3 weeks the flavor should be well developed. If not strong enough steep a little longer or add fresh herbs. When flavour has fully developed strain, heat the vinegar very gently and pour into freshly sterilized bottles and label. Vinegars should last between 3-12 months depending on the herb combinations used.

Herbal butters can also be used to bring flavour to dishes. Use on savoury

bread and muffins, for sandwiches, sauteing meats and fish, melting over vegetables, as an accompaniment to grilled foods and blended into sauces.

To make herb butters: soften butter or margarine in a large bowl, add chopped herbs and flowers to taste, add a dash of lemon juice and a shake of pepper to taste. Mix together well then shape into pats or pipe rosettes onto a baking sheet then freeze for 2 hours. Once frozen store in sealable containers or plastic bags for 3-4 months. Basil, chives, garlic, parsley, oregano, sage, tarragon, thyme, dill, mint or combinations of these are wonderful additions to almost any meal. If you want to serve herbal butter at the table keep the pats in ice-water until serving time. Add with a garnish of edible flowers or sprigs of fresh herbs.

Herbal Oils Herbs can also be added to oils. Only single herbs are usually used in making herbal oils as their flavours are intense. If you would like to make a blended oil use complementary flavours. Oils do not have a long shelf life so use within 1-2 months. If using garlic in an herbal oil be sure to refrigerate the oil and use within 1 week as garlic will spoil and can make you quite ill.

To make herbal oils there are two methods:

- 1) cold infused oil: fill a sterilized jar with washed and dried herbs. Bruise the herbs lightly to release their oils. Sprigs of herbs work best but leaves can be removed as well. Cover with oil (light vegetable, olive, safflower or sunflower oils work best) then seal tightly with lid. Let sit in a sunny window for 4 weeks shaking daily. Strain after 4 weeks and pour into a new freshly sterilized jar. A sprig of one of the herbs can be added for decoration. Tightly seal and store in a cool dark place.
- 2) heat infused oil: place a ceramic or glass bowl over a pan of simmering water. Add two cups of oil and two cups of fresh herbs. Let the mixture stand over the heat for 3 hours. Strain then pour into freshly sterilized bottles. Seal tightly and store in a cool dark place.

Drying Herbs: drying herbs is a wonderful way of preserving fresh herbs for use over the winter months. Herbs are at their peak of flavour just after the dew has dried off the leaves but before the plants are exposed to the hot sun. Pick leaves before the plants flower for the best flavour. Brush off any dirt, bundle together and hang to dry somewhere warm and dark. When dry (the leaves will be crunchy) strip the leaves carefully off of the stems and store in a sealed jar out of the light. Keep leaves whole until ready to use to avoid losing any flavour.

Freezing: Not all herbs dry well. Some retain their flavours better by freezing. Parsley, basil and dill are best frozen. To freeze parsley and dill wash leaves carefully, pat dry then place in a labeled freezer bag in the freezer. Break off pieces as needed for cooking. Basil is best frozen in water or oil. I make up a batch of pesto then spoon pats onto a cookie sheet and freeze. The pats are then placed in a labeled freezer bag and placed in the freezer. Add the pats at the end of cooking so they just melt.

Herbal Teas: Fresh herb infused teas are wonderfully refreshing on hot summer days. For hot tea add your favorite herb into a tea ball and pour boiling water over. Let sit for 5 minutes or to desired strength. Sun tea is made by filling a glass jar with herbs, water and lemon slices, sealing and let sit in the sun for a couple of hours. Iced tea is made by pouring boiling water over a selection of herbs and tea bags. Let sit for 10 minutes then dilute with cold water. Add lemon wedges, orange juice, sweeten with honey if desired and add ice and you have a wonderfully refreshing summer drink.

The Most Commonly Available and Used Herbs

- 1) **Lemon Balm**-can be perennial if in a sheltered spot. Use only young leaves chopped up in desserts, seafood dishes, to infuse jellies, and in teas.
- 2) **Basil**-lots of different cultivars and flavours. Genovese is the best for pesto. Very prone to fusarium wilt so buy only healthy plants. Annual. Does'nt dry.
- 3) **Chives**- perennial member of the onion family. Young shoots are used as green onions. Flowers have mild onion flavour and makes a lovely pink vinegar. Cut back after flowering for another flush of shoots.
- 4) **Cilantro**-annual. Seeds are coriander. Harvest older leaves for strongest flavour. Bolts quickly so keep from flowering. Start new plants every 3 weeks
- 5) **Dill**-most often used for pickles. Not suited for pot culture. Harvest young leaves and shoots. Seeds are good in salads, breads, and with fish. Annual.
- 6) **Fennel**-has a licorice flavour. Growth habit similar to dill. Florence fennel produces an edible swollen base with the same licorice flavour. Annuals.
- 7) **Lemongrass**- lemon flavoured tender perennial that needs lots of heat to do well. Pulverize the tender insides of the grass blades for cooking. Use the outer tougher leaves on the BBQ to flavour meats and veggies while cooking.
- 8) **Mint**- Comes in many wonderful flavours-spearmint, peppermint, apple mint, orange mint, sweet pear mint, pineapple and banana mint to name only a few. Not all are hardy. Use fresh or dried leaves. Invasive growth habit.
- 9) **Oregano**-low ground hugging plants that like it hot and dry. May overwinter. Dries well. Flowers are strongly flavoured and need to be separated from the green calyx. Smell before you buy to get strongest flavoured.
- 10) **Marjoram**- annual cousin of oregano. Similar flavour to oregano. Leaves and flowers dry well. Similar growth habit to oregano but taller.
- 11) **Parsley**- Italian or flat leafed parsley has best flavour. Harvest leaves from base of plant all season. Root is edible. Freezing best. Good for containers.
- 12) **Rosemary**- herb of remembrance. Tender evergreen perennial. Does well indoors and in pots. Leaves strongly flavoured so use sparingly. Dries well.
- 13) **Sage**- perennial that likes it hot and dry. Will grow into a small woody bush. Leaves are strongly flavoured so use sparingly. Leaves make a great jelly. Many varieties with colourful foliage but aren't hardy.
- 14) **Savory**- summer savory (annual) and winter savory (perennial). Called the bean herb. Winter savory has stronger flavour. Dries well.

- 15) **French tarragon**- (not Russian) perennial. Grows into a large plant. Strongly flavoured. Best frozen but will dry ok. Makes a tasty vinegar.
- 16) **Thyme**- occasionally perennial if protected. Low growing. Likes it hot and on the dry side. Many different flavours available. Trim regularly to keep plants bushy and vigorously growing. Dries and freezes well. Easy from seed.
- 17) **Lemon Verbena**- a tender woody perennial that does well in pots and indoors. Likes it hot but needs water. Strip leaves from stems. Dries well. Bruise and chop finely for best flavor.
- 18) **Chervil**- annual. Lesser known but leaves loaded with calcium. Good with potatoes, in soups and salads, with fish and in eggs. Component of French herbs de Provence.
- 19) **Caraway**- annual. Seeds are used to flavour breads and stews. Hang seed heads in paper bags. Dry seeds will fall into bag. Store in glass jars.
- 20) **Lavender**-border-line hardy. English lavender is the hardiest. Flowers and leaves are used in cooking, scent pillows, potpourri and a variety of crafts. Leaves dry well but is best used fresh for cooking. Will grow indoors in a sunny window.
- 21) **Lemon Grass**- large tropical grass with intense lemon scent and flavour. Young leaves are best to use for cooking. Older leaves are tough. Needs heat to do well so is best grown in a pot. Bring indoors in a sunny window for winter. Used in Asian and Thai recipes.