

Planting your first herb garden

Get excited

Imagine having fresh herbs any time you want them just by walking out your door and into your garden. Many commonly used culinary herbs grow well in North Texas and that is great news for beginning gardeners.

More good news...once established herbs plants are generally disease resistant, require only a small amount of supplemental water during dry conditions and do not need fertilizing as long as they live in soil that contains a good mix of organic materials.

Make decisions

Who: To be productive and attractive herb gardens require initial care, weeding and pruning. If you will be doing most of the caregiving, consider beginning small and expanding over time.

What: Choosing which herbs to grow is a pleasurable challenge. Herbs originating from Mexico, the Mediterranean and Central American have an excellent chance of success.

When: Perennial and cool season herbs should be planted in the fall or early spring. Herbs sensitive to cool temperatures, such as basil, should be planted after all danger of frost usually in early April.

Where: Herbs can grow in a dedicated herb garden, interspersed with your landscape plants or vegetables or in containers. Be sure to keep your herb plants close enough to allow easy harvesting and watering.

Why: Fresh herbs make food taste better. Birds, bees, hummingbirds and butterflies enjoy herb flowers and seeds.

Create a plan

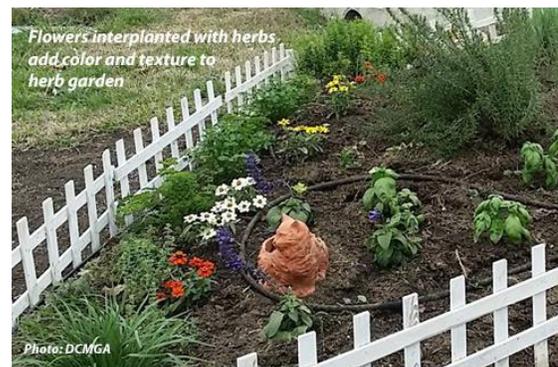
First, decide where to place your herb garden. Choose a site with full sun 4–6 hours per day for most herbs. Morning sun is best. Make sure your site has access to water.

Because herb plants come in several sizes when mature, understanding the size and growth habits of each type of herb helps you place them correctly in your plan. For example:

- Rosemary is a shrub that can be 5 feet tall and wide.
- Mint spreads aggressively and is best planted in its own bed or container.

Layout your future herb garden on a sheet of graph paper or use an on-line gardening planning guide. You will find several web-based tools by searching for “garden planting applications”.

Your plan should provide space around each plant sufficient to allow drying and access to sun. Put tall herbs toward the back or place them on the west side to provide afternoon shade. Low growing herbs may be used as border plants such as thyme, oregano, chives and sage. Group plants based on their water and sun needs.



Prepare the garden beds

You may choose to plant your herbs in the ground or in raised beds. Because North Texas clay soils can be challenging due to poor drainage and alkalinity, many gardeners choose to grow in raised beds filled with potting soil.

1. Clear the area of plant and other materials.
2. Turn the soil to a depth of 8–10 inches and work in 3–4 inches of composted materials.
3. (optional) Place a soaker hose or drip irrigation to water plants. This efficient method of delivery saves water and keeps moisture away from plant leaves, which can lead to disease problems. Having a watering system in place also relieves the gardener from carrying hoses to the garden.
4. Raised beds can be constructed using wood, concrete blocks, logs or other materials. A soil depth of at least 8–10 inches is recommended.

Plant



Herbs can be grown from seed, transplants or cuttings. However, seed germination for herb plants is often slow and unsuccessful. Since your new herb garden will likely have only one or two of each type, transplants offer the best chance of success.

Dig a hole equal to the depth of the plant in its container. Gently remove the plant from the nursery container by turning the pot upside down and while supporting the plant with your hand, gently tap the rim of the pot against a hard surface.

Put the plant into the hole and push soil around it. Press soil firmly to ensure good contact with the transplant's roots and moisten the soil.

Add a 3-inch layer of mulch around, but not touching, the plant to help moisture retention, soil temperature moderation and weed control.

Care and harvesting

Keep the soil around your newly planted herbs moist for a few days to encourage the roots to move into the surrounding soil. After that period of transition, only add water when the soil 1–2 inches deep is dry. The organic material you added to the soil in the beginning and the later the decomposition of the mulch you placed on top of the soil will provide all the nutrients that your plants need.

You may harvest herbs any time after the plant has successfully added a few inches of new growth. For example, you can harvest:

- Basil when plant is about 6–8 inches tall
- Oregano when sprigs are 4-inches long
- Parsley as soon as leaves have mature size
- Rosemary and thyme at any time

For annual herbs, such as basil, when the plant begins to flower it is preparing to produce seeds and die. Removing the flowers can help maintain leaf growth for a while. After flowering, the leaves become bitter tasting.

More information:

- <http://dcmga.com/files/2012/10/Herb-Presentation-for-website.pdf>
- http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/organic/files/2011/03/E-561_growing_herbs_texas.pdf
- Building a raised bed garden: http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/earthkind/files/2010/10/E-560_raised_bed_garden.pdf
- [Here is a list of herbs you can grow in North Texas \(http://dcmga.com/files/2012/10/North-Texas-Herbs.pdf\).](http://dcmga.com/files/2012/10/North-Texas-Herbs.pdf)