

Herbs for Beginners

by Debbie Lauer, Bell County Master Gardener

The best spaghetti sauce I ever made was the result of an experiment of cooking with fresh herbs. To make the experience even better, I had grown the Sweet Basil I used in the sauce on my deck. I did everything wrong for the plant but somehow managed to keep it alive long enough to achieve the crop of leaves that produced the sauce. I have never been able to duplicate that sauce but, I continue to experiment with growing various culinary herbs in an effort to make an even better one. Many herbs grow well here in Central Texas and they have many uses. Almost everyone is familiar with culinary herbs. There are also herbs grown for medicinal purposes and herbs grown for ornamental landscape purposes. Some are grown to provide food for butterfly larvae in a butterfly garden. Some do all of the above! Some of the culinary herbs are the easiest to grow. Think about the herbs you cook with and try to grow them.

Most herbs prefer a rich well drained organic soil, but some are tolerant of our sticky, rocky clay. They need 5-6 hours of sun, usually morning sun is best. You can start with a few containers on your deck or patio; or build a small raised bed. I use containers on my deck. This allows me to experiment with various herbs and to move the containers around to find out what combination of sun and shade the herbs like best. Doing this I found out chives, mint, and parsley like the shadiest place on my deck that has a mix of morning and late afternoon sun. Be sure to choose larger containers; 16 inches or larger work best for me. Smaller pots dry out too quickly during the heat of the summer. If you plant more than one type of herb in a container make sure that they all have the same watering requirements.

Your containers should have one or more drainage holes. Fill them with a mix of potting soil, amended with about 1/3 by volume of compost; then add some extra perlite or vermiculite to keep the soil loose. When using plastic pots I usually put an inch or two of pea gravel in the bottom for drainage AND to keep my herbs from being blown over, or into the neighbor's yard during a storm. Herbs roots are usually shallow and for this reason a layer of mulch should be added to protect them. Now comes the hard part, figuring out what to plant.

Annual herbs such as basil and cilantro, do well in containers. Other annuals such as dill or fennel are tall plants and will do better planted in a bed. Dill and cilantro are cool season herbs and do better in the spring and fall. Basil will go all summer if it harvested consistently and is planted in the correct location. Parsley is a biennial but is usually grown as an annual here and also prefers spring and fall weather and shade. Be sure to plant extra parsley as it is also a favorite of black swallowtail caterpillars.

Perennials herbs that have worked well for me are chives, rosemary, sage, oregano and spearmint. I don't recommend planting mint in a raised bed as it can be very invasive under the right conditions. I am not sure that I could pry my mint out of the pot it currently occupies. I hack at the roots occasionally to try and thin it but it just keeps going. Chives are susceptible to our summer sun, so find that just right spot as I did to keep it going during the summer. I have also had good luck with catnip, but, be prepared for midnight visitors. My cat loved it and so did all his buddies in the neighborhood. Rosemary can be grown in containers but will also grow into a large shrub if planted in the ground; beware; an extended cold snap could kill it.

When you are ready to use some herbs, harvest a few leaves at a time. Heavy and frequent harvests are OK, but never take more than half of the leaves from the plant at a time. During summer months try to harvest no later than mid-morning. Various sources say that the best flavor for leafy herbs comes just before flowering as some herbs can get bitter after they bloom. Snip off the tops of rosemary and thyme sprigs.

Now that you know what will grow, you have to choose between varieties of herbs, there are lots of them. My favorite basil is lemon basil. It has a sweet lemon taste and the crushed leaves are very fragrant. Siam Queen basil is purple and adds some color and has a great flavor. There are many more varieties of basil and other herbs. Things like apple mint, chocolate mint, lemon thyme; creeping varieties, variegated varieties, you get the idea. Over time you can try them all and find your favorites.

