

Let's Fall for Herbs!

Here in South Texas fall offers us the opportunity to enjoy our best growing season. Shrubs, flowering plants, and vegetables appreciate cooler days and crisper nights and reflect this with greener leaves, brighter flowers, and improved yields.

- One group of plants especially seems to benefit from autumn's refreshing weather - **herbs!** Many of the most popular herbs originate in the Mediterranean region and are tolerant of sun, drought, and poor soils. Harsh conditions actually enhance production of the essential oils contained in these plants, resulting in their unique flavors and aromatic properties. However, high heat, combined with high humidity, causes many herbs to grow slowly or suffer in midsummer. In the Valley, perennial herbs are best planted in the fall.
- Our mild winters allow for garden plantings of tender perennial herbs that must be grown indoors farther north - bay trees, rosemary and lemon grass are examples. Most herbs thrive this time of year - - - foliage is lush, fragrance is stronger and flavor is better.
- Fall planting allows early harvest of tender leaves to season or garnish holiday meals. Plants will be well established as spring arrives permitting continuous harvest of seeds, leaves, and flowering tops until summer heat returns.
- Root systems developed in cool weather increase tolerance to heat and drought and insure vigorous growth next fall.
- Whether used in cooking, for teas, dried arrangements, potpourri, or as ornamentals the list of herbs which may be grown here is extensive. But since we all enjoy eating, especially during the holidays, let's discuss some of the most flavorful culinary herbs for fall gardens.

Mint: Mints are universally admired plants, familiar to many cultures and cuisines. Their fragrances and flavors are as varied as their uses. Besides the customary spearmint and peppermint available mints include fruit flavors (apple and pineapple), citrus flavors (orange, lime, and grapefruit), and even candy cane and chocolate mint! Popular locally are Mexican mint and Hierba Buena from Mexico. Mints prefer light shade, rich soil, and adequate moisture and grow so rapidly they should be assigned their own beds or planters.

Rosemary: A perennial favorite, rosemary is an old herb, rich in tradition and lore. Rosemary is available in both upright and prostrate forms, and depending on variety, producing flowers ranging from blue to pink to pure white. Many cultivars exist and all are wonderful in the garden, landscape, or containers. Upright rosemary produces the best flavored leaves, essential to many meat dishes and sauces. They may be used either dried or fresh.

Oregano: An oregano by any other name is not necessarily oregano. The familiar oregano scent common to many different species has resulted in confusion over which plant is oregano and which is not. Nomenclature aside, marvelous seasonings are obtained from them all. Garden oregano, Italian oregano and Greek oregano vary somewhat in appearance, growth habit, and hardiness, and each exhibits subtle

differences in aroma and taste. All are quite popular and equally delicious. Three other non-related plants (*Lippia*, *Poliomentha*, and *Coleus amboinicus*) are referred to as Mexican or Cuban oregano and are used extensively in Mexican cooking. All are perennial and all are at home in the herb garden.

Chives: These small onion-like perennials are a must for every kitchen. They may be used as a border in the garden or placed in pots or the window sill where they are handy for frequent clipping. Varieties include delicate onion flavored chives and the more pungent garlic chives. Each is used in the same manner depending upon the dish or flavor desired.

Thyme: Take time to plant thyme in your garden. These tiny leaved plants impart a distinctive flavor. French or English thymes are basic seasonings in many recipes. Beyond these common thymes more exotic scents such as coconut, caraway, and lemon are sometimes sold. Thyme grows best here in cool weather but are perennial if provided with good drainage and some summer shade.

Sage: This grey leaved beauty is another herb that is at its peak in our mild winters. Not to be confused with our native Texas sage (Cenizo), Garden sage is widely used for poultry and sausage seasoning and in dressings and stuffing. Besides adding zest to food, sage is a lovely addition to the vegetable garden or perennial border.

Basil: This a tender annual, is a culinary necessity and may be grown indoors for winter use. Our mild winter this past year allowed basil to escape frost damage. A requisite in pestos and sauces, basil is available in many colors, textures, and flavors. Basils often cross pollinate and readily self-sow. If you want your basil to come back true, group like plants and put plenty of space between different varieties or they probably will not be the same next season, although still flavorful.

Accents: Though not perennials, other herbs bear consideration for fall planting. **Sweet fennel** and **dill** contribute lacy foliage and spicy seeds to our tables. Parsley, a biennial, is another excellent cool season crop. **Italian parsley** is best for cooking, while **curled parsley** garnishes with distinction. And what is a Valley garden without a green, aromatic patch of **cilantro**? Many, many other herbs await to fill your garden and kitchen with an array of fragrances and flavors. Fall is the best time to start and enjoy these gifts of nature.

(Information Source: Donald Cox of Perennial Favorites, Brownsville, TX)

Article written by the Cameron County Horticulture Education Committee.

Questions or Comments write to: Cameron County Master Gardeners Association, 1390 W. Expressway 83, San Benito, TX 78586-3869.

Phone: 956-361-8236 or Fax: 956-361-8289 or email:

cameroncountymastergardeners@gmail.com