



Growing Culinary Herbs

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Herbs are plants that are used as flavoring agents. The common herbs used in cooking are referred to as culinary herbs. Mild or savory herbs impart a delicate flavor to foods while the stronger or pungent herbs add zest to foods. A number of additional herbs are used for medicinal or ornamental purposes. This publication, however, deals only with culinary herbs used in cooking. These herbs are attractive and varied so their ornamental value is also important.

The leaves of most herbs are the part of the plant that is used although the seeds or roots of some herbs can also be used. Herbs are used in small quantities, so usually only a few plants are necessary to provide sufficient fresh and dried herbs for the entire season.

Herb gardening is becoming popular throughout Texas. New enthusiasm for “natural” foods has heightened this interest. In addition, herbs add flavor and zest to creative cookery. Most food recipes can be accentuated with proper use of culinary herbs.

Location

The ornamental value of herbs enables them to be grown in flower beds, in rock gardens as borders or as corner plantings. Some herbs are annuals while others are perennial or come up year after year. One can locate annual herbs in annual flower gardens or vegetable gardens. Locate perennial herbs at the side of the garden where they won't interfere with next year's soil preparation.

Many gardeners establish a small herb garden near the home. Generally, a 6 to 10 foot square or rectangular area is sufficient. Circular or free-form designs can also be used.

Use the information contained in this publication for proper spacing, and locate the tallest herbs to the back of the plot.

As the garden grows

Care for the herb garden is similar to a vegetable or flower garden. Select a sunny, well-drained location. Apply a balanced fertilizer but avoid excessive use of nitrogen fertilizers. Consult the county Extension office for soil preparation, fertilization and other good garden cultural practices.

Water as necessary during dry periods. Generally, about 1 inch of water is needed per week, if not supplied by natural rainfall. Applying mulch helps conserve soil moisture and reduces weed growth as well. Mints prefer moist soil so they require more frequent watering.

Establishing the herb garden

Establish annual and biennial herbs by planting seeds directly in the garden or starting seeds indoors for later transplanting to the garden. Save seed produced by the herb plants for next year's crop, or obtain seed from your local garden center or seed catalog.

To save your own seed, harvest the entire seed head after it has dried on the plant. Then allow seeds to dry in a protected location that is cool and dry. After the seeds are thoroughly dry, thresh the seed from the heads and discard the trash. Store in labeled jars in a dark, cool, dry location.

Some herb seeds such as dill, anise, caraway or coriander can be used for flavorings.

Perennial herbs can be propagated by cuttings or by division. Divide plants every 3 or 4 years in the early spring. Dig up the plants and cut into several sections. You can also cut 4- to 6-inch sections of the stem, and root these by placing the cuttings in moist sand in a shady area. In 4 to 8 weeks roots should form on these cuttings. Herbs such as sage, winter savory and thyme can be propagated by cuttings. Chives, lovage and tarragon can be propagated by dividing the roots or crowns. Apple mint forms runners or stems that run along the ground so these can be easily propagated by covering a portion of the runner and allowing it to form roots.

Container Gardening

Most herbs are willing to grow in pots, so even apartment dwellers with a balcony, patio or windowsill can enjoy growing them. The flexibility of containers means they can be repositioned to catch the sun, rearranged to make a focal point, or used to fill seasonal gaps in the patio garden. The plants are very easy to monitor.

All the containers need drainage holes and a layer of gravel, perlite or broken pottery in the bottom to prevent water logging. Fill the pot with a good potting mixture and plant the seedling. Clip or pick leaves often to encourage bushy new growth.

Many herbs will do well both indoors and outdoors if there's ample sunlight — just remember to bring them indoors when it starts to get cold. Place in a sunny south window, and use care similar to houseplants. Either dig up herbs toward the end of the growing season and place in pots, or start from seed indoors. Basil, chives, mint, parsley, sweet marjoram and rosemary are best adapted to pot culture.

Harvesting

Leaves of many herbs such as parsley and chives can be harvested for fresh seasonings. On these plants, gradually remove some of the leaves as needed, but don't remove all the foliage at one time. These plants produce over a long period if they are well cared for. On rosemary and thyme, clip the tops when the plants are in full bloom. Usually, leaves and flowers are harvested together. Basil, fennel, mint, sage, summer savory, sweet marjoram, tarragon and winter savory are harvested just before the plants start to bloom. Chervil and parsley leaves can be cut and dried anytime.

Drying

After harvesting, hang herbs in loosely tied bundles in a well-ventilated room. You can also spread the branches on a screen or cheesecloth, or spread herb leaves on flat trays when only the leaves are needed. To keep dust off the herbs, use a cloth or similar protective cover that allows moisture to pass through.

It is generally best to dry naturally in a cool, dark room rather than use artificial heat. Experts can use artificial heat, but you may lose flavor and quality by attempting this drying method.

Storage

When herbs are thoroughly dry, seal them in airtight containers such as fruit jars and store in a cool, dark location. Any sign of moisture accumulating in the jars indicates that the herbs are not thoroughly dry. Pulverize flower stalks before putting them in jars. Store foliage herbs either pulverized or as whole leaves depending on their intended use.