

# Herbal Delights

## Overview

An herb is a plant that does not produce a woody stem as does a tree but will live long enough to develop flowers and seeds. Herbs include annuals, biennials, and perennials. Depending on who's counting, there are 40-70 different kinds of herbs.

## Attributes

Most herbs are in two or more categories:

### Aromatic

Most have pleasant smelling flowers or foliage and are grown for their oils to produce perfumes, toilet water, and various scents. Examples: Lavender, mint, marjoram, lovage, rosemary, and basil.

### Culinary

Prized for adding flavor to cooking. Among these, parsley is produced in the largest amount and used mostly as a garnish. Next in popularity is sage. More examples include basil, chives, dill, thyme, savory, marjoram, and mint.

### Medicinal

Used in medicine since ancient times, some are believed to have the power to cure a wide range of ailments or to ward off evil spirits. Others, such as garlic, may have preventive characteristics.

While present medical knowledge recognizes some herbs as having healing properties, others are highly overrated and should be used carefully, if at all, because they can interact with medications, whether that's prescriptions or over-the-counter items.

Before using herbs for medicinal purposes, consult with your health care professional.

### Ornamental

Grown for fresh or dried arrangements, these may have brightly colored flowers and foliage while others have variegated foliage. A few examples are thyme, mint, lavender, and chives.

## Longevity

*Annuals* grow and bloom one season and then die. Examples: Anise, basil, chervil, coriander, dill, and summer savory.

*Biennials* live for two seasons, and will bloom during the second season. Examples: Caraway and parsley.

*Perennials* can live for a number of years and will bloom each season. Some are deciduous (die down

for the winter] whereas others are evergreen. Deciduous examples are chives, fennel, and winter savory. Evergreen herbs include marjoram, rosemary, and thyme.

## Planting and Cultivation Outdoors

### How to start

Nearly all herbs can be grown from seed. Generally, the finer the seed, the more shallow it should be sown.

Sow anise, coriander, dill and fennel directly into the garden because they do not transplant well.

Cuttings and divisions are useful, even easier than sowing seeds, when you propagate tarragon, chive, and mint. In fact, true French tarragon can only be started from a cutting or a division of an existing plant.

### Soil

Most herbs grow best in well-drained, fairly fertile soil with a neutral pH of 6.5-7.0. Drainage is probably the single most important factor in successful herb gardening. Herbs don't thrive in soggy soil.

### Fertilizer

The soil does not have to be especially fertile, so little or no fertilizer should be used. Highly fertile soil tends to produce excessive amounts of foliage with poor flavor.

Among the exceptions are chervil, fennel, lovage and summer savory, all of which require moderate amounts of fertilizer. Compost is ideal.

### Location

Herbs, in general, need full sun, but will thrive on as little as 6 hours of sunlight per day. A few herbs, such as mint, need to be contained or they will overtake a garden. Plant these potential runaways in containers, or plant in a container which you sink into the ground. The pot should confine the roots for a couple of years.

## ***Growing Herbs Indoors***

For the most part, herbs require lots of sunlight. This is why keeping herbs in the house during the winter requires supplemental lighting. It's important to realize that the intensity of winter light is often less than one-tenth of the outdoor light during summer.

Unless light is plentiful, growth of most indoor herbs will slow or stop during the winter even when kept in a warm location. Perennial herbs will do better if you place them outdoors during the summer in a protected location or plunge the pot in soil up to its rim.

### **Watering indoor herbs**

Water thoroughly only when the soil surface is dry to the touch. Don't drench herbs - avoid getting their roots soggy.

### **Fertilizing indoor herbs**

Indoor herbs will require weekly feedings of liquid fertilizer or organic fish emulsion whenever plants are actively growing.

## ***Insects and Other Pests***

Very few insects, mites or diseases attack herbs.

In fact, a number of herbs are said to repel pests and may make terrific companion plants. Some herbs, such as garlic, are even used in organic pest management formulas.

Aphids may attack anise, caraway, dill, curled leaf parsley, and fennel. Other potential pests include whiteflies, mealybugs, scale insects, and thrips. And in hot dry weather, spider mites may be troublesome.

## ***Additional Information***

Oregon State University doesn't currently have any publications about growing and/or using herbs. However, OSU Master Gardeners at your county's Extension Service office are available to answer your questions. See phone numbers below.

*Growing herbs in the home garden* [www.wvu.edu/~agexten/hortcult/herbs/ne208hrb.htm](http://www.wvu.edu/~agexten/hortcult/herbs/ne208hrb.htm)

*Herbs to grow from seed* [www.backyardgardener.com/herb/](http://www.backyardgardener.com/herb/)

*Growing individual herbs* [www.pioneerthinking.com/growingherbs.html](http://www.pioneerthinking.com/growingherbs.html)

*Herb companion chart* [www.gardeningguides.com/cgi-bin/print/friendly.cgi](http://www.gardeningguides.com/cgi-bin/print/friendly.cgi)

*Growing herbs indoors* [www.doityourself.com/vegetables/growingherbsindoors.html](http://www.doityourself.com/vegetables/growingherbsindoors.html)

*Herb gardening for bees* <http://alnature.com/library/herb/htm>

*Gourmet Herbs* (a Brooklyn Botanic Garden Handbook)

*Herbs, An Illustrated Guide* (Sunset Books)

*All About Herbs* (Ortho Books)

Most of these small, soft-bodied critters can be easily and safely managed with regular use of harsh water sprays or insecticidal soap, diluted according to label directions, both applied directly to the pests.

Disease, other than root problems due to excessively wet soil or potting mix, is uncommon in the herb family. Sometimes mint is infected by rust.

## ***Harvesting***

Fresh leaves may be picked as soon as the plant has enough foliage to maintain growth. The essential oil in herbs is the source of their signature aromas and flavors.

It is best to harvest herbs in the morning when the oils are at the highest concentration. To ensure good oil content, pick leaves after dew has dried but before the sun becomes too hot.

To preserve your herbs for use during the winter, harvest the leaves before the flower buds open, then dry them.

## ***Drying Your Herbs***

Most herbs are at their peak flavor just before flowering, so this is a good time to collect them for drying and storage.

Cut the herbs early in the morning just after the dew has dried. Cut annuals off at ground level. Perennials may be cut about one-third down the main stem, including the side branches.

For tips about drying and freezing herbs, see [www.wvu.edu/~agexten/hortcult/herbs/ne208hrb.htm](http://www.wvu.edu/~agexten/hortcult/herbs/ne208hrb.htm).

*To obtain more gardening information, contact your local OSU Extension Office.*

*Or go to the OSU Extension's Gardening Encyclopedia at <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/gardening>.*

*Clackamas County Master Gardeners 503-655-8631*

*Washington County Master Gardeners 503-725-2300*

Also look for OSU Master Gardeners at Farmer's Markets and County Fairs.