

Growing Herbs

Overview

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

Attributes

Herbs are categorized in two or more ways:

- **Aromatic**

Most herbs 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**

These herbs are prized for adding flavor to cooking. Among these herbs, parsley is produced in the highest quantity and used mostly as a garnish. Next in popularity is sage. More examples include basil, chives, dill, thyme, savory, marjoram, mint and rosemary.

- **Medicinal**

Used in medicine since ancient times, some herbs 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 prescription 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 herbs may have brightly colored flowers and foliage while others have variegated foliage. A few examples are thyme, rosemary, mint, lavender, and chives.

Longevity

Annual herbs grow and bloom one season and then die. Examples: anise, basil, chervil, coriander, dill, and summer savory.

Biennial herbs live for two seasons and will bloom during the second season. Examples: caraway and parsley.

Perennial herbs can live for a number of years and will bloom each season. Some are deciduous (die

down for the winter) whereas others are evergreen. Examples of deciduous perennial herbs are chives, fennel, and winter savory whereas evergreen perennial herbs include marjoram, rosemary, and thyme.

Growing herbs outdoors

How to start

Nearly all herbs can be grown from seed. The guideline for planting seeds is sow them at a depth equal to 2 to 4 times their width. In other words, 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 to pH 7.0. Drainage is probably the single most important factor in successful herb gardening. Herbs stall, and may die, in soggy soil.

Fertilizer

The soil does not have to be especially fertile, so use little or no fertilizer. With herbs, highly fertile soil tends to produce excessive amounts of foliage with little flavor.

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

Location

In general, herbs 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 any potential runaways in containers, or plant in a container which you sink into the ground to just below the rim. Use a pot large enough to confine the roots for a couple of years.

Growing herbs indoors

For the most part, herbs require lots of sunlight. This is why growing herbs indoors 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. Then too, the

window glass further decreases the amount of light that's available for indoor plants of any kind.

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 benefit 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 allow potted herbs to sit in a saucer of water; their roots will die.

Fertilizing indoor herbs

Indoor herbs will require weekly applications of liquid fertilizer or organic fish emulsion whenever the 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 some gardeners believe that herbs make terrific companion plants. Some herbs, such as garlic, are even used in organic pest management formulas.

Aphids, a common soft-bodied pest in any garden, may feed on anise, caraway, dill, curled leaf parsley, and fennel. Sometimes the first clue of their presence is the stickiness on the leaves and stems.

Other potential, but less common, pests include whiteflies, mealybugs, scale, thrips and slugs. And in hot dry weather, spider mites may be troublesome.

Most of the 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. Whatever the treatment, be certain the label states its is safe to use on edibles.

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; if so, remove the affected stem and associated leaves.

Harvesting and storing

During the season, you may pick fresh leaves as soon as the plant has enough foliage to maintain growth. In general, herbs have the best flavor if gathered before the flower buds open.

Harvest herbs in the morning, when the essential oils that give herbs their signature aromas and flavors are at their highest concentration. Pick leaves after dew has dried, but before the sun becomes too hot.

For major harvests, annual herbs may be cut off at ground level, while perennials should only be cut down about one-third of their size.

You can preserve many herbs for future use by drying or freezing them. To do the latter, place chopped fresh herbs in an ice cube tray, cover with water, and freeze. Basil is basically devoid of flavor if dried, so use it fresh or freeze it one of two ways – as pesto, or in an ice cube tray as chopped leaves covered with water.

To learn more about growing, using, and preserving herbs, see the publications listed below, or phone the Master Gardeners at your county's Extension Service office.

Additional information

The following are just a few of the many available resources:

Web sites:

Herbs to Grow from Seed www.backyardgardener.com/herb/

Growing Individual Herbs www.pioneerthinking.com/growingherbs.html

Growing Herbs Indoors www.doityourself.com/vegetables/growingherbsindoors.html

Herb Gardening for Bees <http://altnature.com/library/herb.htm>

Growing Herbs in the Home Garden www.wvu.edu/~agexten/hortcult/herbs/ne208hrb.htm

Books:

Gourmet Herbs (a Brooklyn Botanic Garden Handbook)

Herbs, An Illustrated Guide (Sunset Books)

All About Herbs (Ortho Books)

Master Gardener™ Advice

- Call Home Horticulture Helpline: 503-655-8631 (Clackamas County), 503-821-1150 (Washington County), or 503-445-4608 (Multnomah County).
- For more 10-Minute University™ handouts and class schedule, visit www.cmastergardeners.org or www.metromastergardeners.org.
- Look for Master Gardeners at area Farmers' Markets.

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