

Growing Herbs
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Ben Franklin had a lot to say about herbs, "Time is an herb that cures all diseases." And cynically, "Much virtue in herbs, little in men." Ben was right, herbs have a lot going for them. Our main use of herbs such as basil, rosemary, sage and thyme is as food seasonings; however, an herb is any plant that is considered useful. Herbs may be a source of fragrance, dye, flavoring for foods, decoration on a piece of meat in the restaurant, a cure for bad breath, and ground up into elixirs sold in organic stores. Herbs are the universal health food.

An herb gardener has choices on where to grow herbs. Herbs in a vegetable garden can be sown in rows directly into the soil amongst the vegetables or as an edging to beds. Most herbs thrive in typical well drained garden soil; however, some herbs such as rosemary and lavender are woody plants native to the Mediterranean and prefer gritty, dry soil. In most cases good drainage is crucial because these Mediterranean plants will likely rot in moist soil; however, a conundrum, some herbs such as mint and parsley prefer moist soil.

To avoid the nuances associated with the moisture, texture, and fertility of garden soils, grow herbs in containers. Each container can be a miniature garden, customized for the unique soil, water, and fertilizer requirements of a herb. Imagine the first time guests are served tomatoes from your garden garnished with basil grown in a container on the back stoop. The growth of herbs is easily controlled in containers and, if you are a new gardener, growing herbs in containers can be a very satisfying horticultural experience. The advantages to container-grown herbs are they can be grown close to the kitchen, on the patio, on the back porch steps, or on the kitchen windowsill. Additional benefits are herbs add beauty and fragrance to your living space. And, it's easy to step outside and snip a few stalks so you may find yourself cooking with herbs in new and adventurous ways.

However, as in raising most plants, there are a few guidelines to follow that will encourage the growth of green, healthy plants. First, place the container in a sunny location. Sun is essential. Most herbs come from the Mediterranean region and other sun drenched areas so most need a place where the sun shines at least 8 hours a day. Growing herbs indoors requires a sunny south-facing windowsill and even then the plants will not grow as well

as they would outdoors. However, some herbs such as chives, parsley, and cilantro will grow with less sunshine .

Growing herbs from seed is a possibility but they will need to be started indoors 1 to 2 months before it is warm enough in the spring to plant outside. The best alternative is to go to Bloomers and buy transplants that should be planted after the danger of frost is past. The container itself can be of any shape but should be good sized and have good drainage. Make sure there are "nice" sized holes in the container bottom. Herbs don't grow well in wet soil and will develop root rot. A large volume of potting mix dries out more slowly than a small volume, so it's better to combine 2 or more plants in a large pot than to put 1 plant in a small pot. However, like all plants, herbs vary in their growth requirements so make sure the plants you place in the same pot need similar growth conditions. Rosemary likes drier and less fertile soil and won't grow well with basil that likes wetter and more fertile soil. And, be a little audacious. Think about planting flowers in a container with similar needs as the companion herbs. In fact, many flowers such as pansies, nasturtiums and marigolds are also edible.

The "soil" in the container should be a medium labeled "potting mix" rather than "potting soil" Potting mix is a lighter medium composed mostly of organic matter such as peat or composted plant matter and designed to give container plants the texture and drainage they need. Potting soil is likely to be a lesser quality growing medium that accentuates poor drainage. However, due to it's organic constituents, potting mix dries out relatively quickly so you'll need to water frequently. If the mix feels dry an inch or so beneath the surface, it's time to water. Additionally, frequent watering tends to wash nutrients from the mix so you'll need to fertilize with half the recommended houseplant fertilizer every 3 weeks or so. Or, add a slow release or organic fertilizer when you plant. Some potting mixes come with slow release fertilizer pellets already mixed in.

Herbs are initially slow starters and seedlings may not appear to grow their first weeks. Eventually, they begin to thrive as the weather warms up.

Herbs are all about leaves. It's the leaves we eat in most cases, so keep up with harvesting to keep plants bushy and discourage them from blooming. Blooming often changes the flavor of the leaves. Harvest the oldest stems individually with scissors rather than mowing the whole plant. This will encourage the growth of leaves.

Besides the traditional herbs such as basil (different varieties), chives cilantro etc., Bloomers also has a nice selection of "nontraditional" herbs including hyssop, pineapple mint, chocolate mint, and stevia. As you begin to grow your herb garden(s), it's nice to remember a quote by Helen Morgenthau Fox, botanist and author, "Gardening with herbs is indulged in by those who like subtlety in their plants in preference to brilliance.