



# Growing Herbs

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## Is It a Cooking Herb or a Spice?

The first thing to know in selecting which herbs to grow is the difference between cooking herbs and spices. The cinnamon stick you put in your hot chocolate or apple cider is a spice while the parsley on the edge of your plate is an herb.

1. Cooking herbs are usually the fresh or dried leaves of plants while spices are the ground seeds, roots, fruits, flowers, and/or bark.
2. Herbs grow very well in temperate zones, while spices generally come from tropical areas.
3. Herbs add subtle flavor, whereas spices are generally more pungent and add more robust flavor.

## Is it an herb or a flower?

Many herbs produce beautiful summertime flowers and many of the flowers that delight us during summer make fragrant additions to our kitchens as well as colorful and tasty additions to our recipes. Flowers like scented geraniums, hibiscus, bee balm, and roses are perennial herbs with flavorful flowers.

Although nearly all herbs start from seed, herbs run the gamut of about 70 cultivars, broken into categories of medicinal, ornamental, and aromatic as well as culinary (cooking) herbs. Many herbs fit into more than one class, making any herb garden a source of attraction, fragrance, as well as healthy and flavorful eating.

## What kind of herb garden will you grow?

Deciding from over 70 herb cultivars can be difficult, but you can grow a special herb garden by choosing herbs according to class. One word of caution — many herbs fit into more than one class! However, that *may* be a bonus!

Another option for choosing herbs is to purchase an herb garden kit.

## Choosing Herbs — Herb Classes & Herb Garden Kits

### **Herb Classes**

#### *Culinary (cooking) Herbs*



Bring life to your kitchen by growing culinary herbs indoors. Growing culinary herbs adds fresh homegrown flavor to menus, charm to décor, and wonderful fragrance to your kitchen. Culinary herb gardens often occupy a spot in the kitchens of the world's best chefs. Parsley, sage, chives, thyme, savory, marjoram, mint and basil are all culinary herbs. Grow your own cooking herbs to add fresh zest and flavor to your menus year-round!

#### *Aromatic Herbs*



Oils from the flowers or foliage of aromatic herbs are used to produce perfumes, sachets, potpourris and other fragrant products. Although extracting oils for perfumes is a complex operation, all it takes to release the fragrance of most aromatic herbs is to crush the leaves. Mint, marjoram, lovage, rosemary, and basil are all aromatic herbs. When growing aromatic herbs indoors, pick fresh leaves as soon as the plant has enough foliage to maintain growth. When dried, aromatic herb leaves will retain their fragrance for a long time.

#### *Ornamental Herbs*



Fill your home with the bright blossoms and colorful foliage of ornamental herbs. Although many herbs bloom in pastels, valerian has bright crimson blossoms, borage and chicory flower in blue. Thyme, mint, lavender, and chives produce colorful foliage in an assortment of different textures and leaf patterns.

#### *Medicinal Herbs*



Back in the days before bottled medicines, herbs were cultivated for nearly every medical condition. Ground into poultices, brewed into teas, boiled into liniments and other elixirs, herbs have long been believed to hold the cures for what ails us. With the rising prices of even over-the-counter medications, many people have gone back to these natural homeopathic remedies. However, before growing herbs indoors for medicinal use, it's best to do some extensive research to be sure that they really are good for what ails you!

### **Herb Garden Kits**

A second, easy way to choose herb cultivars is to purchase an herb garden kit. In addition to allowing you to grow a variety of your favorite herbs, an herb kit is also an affordable way to experiment with new cultivars and, when growing culinary herbs, add new tastes to your recipes.

Herb kits usually include an assortment of popular, easy-to-grow seeds and everything you need to give your herb garden a good start, including instructions and tips for planting and care. Additionally, the different herb seeds in an herb garden kit are compatible companions. One site fits all!

## Outdoor Herb Gardens

To start growing herbs, it's best first to select where and how you want to grow them.

Most herbs thrive in just about any location that gives them plenty of light. Good air circulation and drainage are also important to the success of your herb garden.

The size of your herb garden, of course, depends on the space you have available for growing. Generally, an area 20-feet by 4-feet accommodates a satisfactory variety of cultivars.

The best time to amend soil with nutrient rich compost is when you till your garden plot. Herbs have coarse roots that benefit from chunky organic matter, which helps excess water drain away and also helps provide good air circulation. After planting your herbs, skirt them with a two to three-inch layer of mulch to help soil retain moisture. In addition, composting and mulching helps you maintain the neutral to slightly alkaline soil that most herbs prefer.

Many herbs overlap in category. Border a cooking herb garden with some cultivars that have ornamental or aromatic qualities as well as the culinary. However, remember that the main purpose of a culinary herb garden is for use in your kitchen. Place herbs that you use frequently in less conspicuous areas so that you won't leave big holes in your garden when you harvest them for cooking!

If you're growing culinary herbs, plant your herb garden as close to your kitchen as possible for easy access. Herbs grown in full sun have denser foliage, darker color, and higher levels of the essential oils that add flavor to your recipes.

Most culinary herbs thrive under the same growth conditions as the vegetables they enhance and as such are a natural addition to your vegetable garden. Some herbs even have properties that repel common insect pests and garden diseases, which is an added benefit to your vegetables.

## Planting Garden Herbs

Nurseries usually include planting and care instructions either on an herb seed packets or informational plant stake inserted into seedling pots. Of course, you should follow these instructions. However, if you get your herbs from a friend, farmers' market or otherwise without instructions, they'll generally grow successfully if you follow a few rules of thumb.

1. Good gardening always starts with the soil. Most herbs grow in any fair to good grade soil. For best results, prepare outdoor areas by tilling the bed and amending the soil with some organically rich compost before sowing herb seeds.
2. Sow herb seeds at a depth no more than twice the size of the seed. After planting, thoroughly water seeded areas.
3. Start tiny seeds indoors to keep them from being washed away by wind and rain, gathered by birds, or eaten by earth-dwelling animals and insects. Typically, 6 to 8 weeks before you intend to transplant herbs outdoors is a good time to begin.
4. Plant herb transplants at the same depth as they were in the original container to keep stems healthy. When herb seedlings become pot-bound, gently break the soil clump apart enough to loosen the soil and give roots a chance to spread.
5. Plant bare-root herb plants (e.g. bay laurel tree) at two to three times the depth of the root in a hole that is two to three times its width.
6. After planting transplants or bare roots, a two to three inch layer of mulch helps to both control weeds and retain moisture.

In addition to outdoor garden spots, you can grow herbs in patio containers, as indoor herb gardens, or in a greenhouse. As well as thriving in garden soil and potting soil, herbs also adapt easily to soil-less growing techniques like hydroponics or aquaponics.

## Growing Herbs in Containers

Although container-grown plants usually need more frequent watering and fertilization, pests and disease problems are virtually eliminated. Growing herbs in containers is ripe with advantages.

- Pots can be moved to locations that are more desirable when weather dictates: into the shade when it's too hot and into the sun as the season progresses and sunny areas become overshadowed by trees, shrubs, or walls.
- Using containers and a plant stand gives you more space for more variety.
- Vertical gardening using a plant stand lets you garden standing instead of stooping.
- Containers keep invasive garden plants and weeds away from your herbs.
- Tender herbs grown in containers are easily brought indoors during winter months.

The easiest way to transport herbs indoors for the winter is to grow them in pots, but you may find that adding too many different sizes and types of pots makes your summer herb garden look unorganized and messy. In addition, potted plants need frequent watering since the plants can't draw moisture from the garden soil.

The solution for easy-care herbs in containers is to sink your pots into the ground. Sinking pots provides many benefits for both the plants and the gardener. Aside from allowing you to use cheap plant containers, sinking pots enables your herbs to draw water and nutrients from your garden soil.

Sinking containers into your garden also provides your plants with weed barriers, offers them some relief from competing with other invasive garden plants, and keeps invasive herbs, like mints, in check. Simply dig your sunken herb pots out of your herb garden in the fall, rinse them off, and move them indoors for the winter.

## Container Herb Care

1. Potted herbs (even sunken pots) need good drainage and extra care. Be sure to check them often for dryness and water accordingly. Most plants need at least an inch of water per week.
2. Pot-grown plants need occasional fertilization. Fertilize outdoor pots at least once mid-season with a good organic fertilizer. However, be cautious in fertilization since in most cases, less is more. Over fertilization of herbs results in weak growth and reduces the oils that give the herbs flavor.
3. Regular pruning of herbs promotes fresh and vigorous growth. Use your herbs regularly to keep them pruned. Freeze or dry extra cuttings for off-season use.
4. Most herbs have few problems with pests and disease. Regular weeding, proper watering, and frequent use (pruning) usually eliminates any pests and diseases herbs may encounter.
5. Harvest herbs in the morning when moisture and fragrance are at their peak. However, wait to harvest until after dew has dried.
6. Although you can harvest cooking herbs all season, give perennials some time off in the fall to help them prepare for winter.

## Reverse Acclimation

If you wilt as you watch your herb garden wither in the nippy autumn air, take heart! You don't have to stop growing herbs in the winter.

Tender perennial herbs, like rosemary, need to come indoors to avoid a harsh winter. However, just as setting plants outdoors in the spring, you'll have more success at

maintaining growth and bloom if you acclimatize your perennial herbs before making a permanent move to your kitchen.

The best time to bring herbs indoors from outside is before the first frost. It's also a good idea to make the transition a slow one. Start by bringing your plants inside for an hour or two each day, increasing the time each day for a week or two to help them to adjust to the changes in temperature and light.

One way to protect your herbs from frost is to bring them indoors in the late afternoon and set them out again in the morning, setting them out later and/or bringing them in earlier, little by little, for about a week. Acclimating your plants in this way greatly increases your chance for successfully growing garden herbs indoors.

## Indoor Herb Gardens

Growing herbs indoors is as easy and enjoyable as growing them outdoors and has some advantages over growing them outdoors as well. Indoor container herb gardens are all but immune to attack by diseases and pests and allow you complete control of watering, light, and fertilization.

When growing herbs indoors, the same as growing any plant in a container, the most important thing to remember is to provide a growing environment of nutrient rich soil that has good drainage yet holds moisture.

Most annual herbs and some perennials adapt well to indoor growing. Dwarf varieties and those that reach only a foot in height may be grown in pots as small as six inches in diameter. When given adequate light and proper care, they'll provide you with fresh sprigs of cooking herbs year round.

In fact, growing some herbs in containers is preferable to planting them in your garden. For instance, many members of the mint family are invasive and quickly become a nuisance in the garden, but you can keep their wandering ways in check when you plant them in a pot. To be successful when growing herbs in a container, choose a pot that is at least six inches in diameter with an eight-inch soil depth.

Most potted herbs thrive in any good potting mixture in a container that provides good drainage. Plant herbs for indoor growing in two parts potting soil with one part perlite or coarse sand. An inch of small gravel in the pot bottom ensures adequate drainage.

Your indoor herbs will like the same temperatures you do, as long as you keep your home at about 70 degrees Fahrenheit during the day and not lower than 60 degrees at night. Many herbs are drought tolerant, naturally resistant to insects, disease, and need little fertilization, which makes growing herbs indoors a very easy-care activity.

Although herbs do love the sunshine, growing herbs indoors doesn't mean you have to give them a western or southern exposure. Your container-grown herbs will do best with 14 to 16 hours of light a day, but even a minimum of four hours light per day is enough to keep them alive. If you don't have a kitchen window that allows for at least four hours of sunlight each day, simulate sunlight for indoor-growing herbs with either a grow light or fluorescent fixture. In fact, an inexpensive fluorescent shop light shines with the full spectrum of light, which is what most plants need to thrive. If your herbs begin to look leggy or spindly, they're telling you that they need more light.

Periodic fertilization, yearly repotting, regular watering (according to the requirements of the plant) and occasional pruning is all you need do to maintain your indoor herb garden indefinitely.

## ***Herbs in a Strawberry Pot***

One easy solution for growing herbs indoors is the strawberry pot, an urn with a top opening and several holes along the sides.

Although not really an herb, the leaves of the alpine strawberry are used frequently to flavor herbal teas. When planted in the top opening of your strawberry pot, the alpine strawberry will be a continuing source of enjoyment with delightful blossoms, aromatic leaves, and of course, the very delicious berries!

Another consideration for the top opening of a strawberry pot is a flowering herb like the scented geranium. Some good indoor choices for the side openings include thyme, oregano, chives, and rosemary.

## ***Soil-less growing***

Hydroponic and aquaponic herb growing are two of the soil-less methods many environmentally conscious herb gardeners are substituting for traditional soil-based herb cultivation.

Hydroponic herbs grow up to 50% faster than soil-based plants. Aquaponics is the combination of aquaculture and hydroponics where nutrient-rich fish water is pumped from fish tank into herb garden bed. Plants growing in gravel extract the nutrients and the water drains back into the fish tank clean and freshly oxygenated. Growing herbs using aquaponics can be as simple as pumping water between a small goldfish aquarium and some gravel filled herb pots.

## **Popular Herb Cultivars**

### ***Annual Herbs***

- **Basil (*Ocimum basilicum*)**

Sweet basil is one of the most popular herbs used in cooking and grows easily from seed sown directly in the garden after all danger of frost has passed.

Sweet basil reaches about 18 inches in height. However, there are many basil cultivars and some reach up to three feet tall! Typical spacing for basil plants is 12 inches between plants, and two to three feet between rows.

Pinching basil stems promotes bushy, compact growth. Basil is quick to harvest; cut leaves as early as 6 weeks following planting. Cut basil, leaving four to six leaves above ground. When growing basil for cooking, remove flower spikes before bloom to ensure good leaf production and full flavor.

- **Chervil (*Anthriscus cerefolium*)**

Except for its lighter green leaves, chervil closely resembles parsley and is used in much the same way. Like many other annual herbs, chervil seed can be sown directly into the garden when all danger of frost is past. Chervil grows up to 24 inches tall. Thin small seedlings, spacing them three to four inches apart. Harvest chervil leaves just before flowers blossom. To keep foliage dense, remove flowers before they bloom.

- **Cilantro (*Coriandrum sativum*)**

Cilantro is widely used in both Latin and Southeast Asian dishes but is not to be confused with Vietnamese coriander (*Polygonum odoratum*) which is a perennial.

Cilantro goes to seed quickly when temperatures rise. As well as using the greens, grind cilantro seeds to fill a *spice jar* with coriander.

Sow cilantro seeds directly into the garden at two-week intervals to keep a fresh supply. Although plants grow to about two feet tall, leaves are ready for harvest when the plant reaches about six inches in height. Thin seedlings, spacing them seven to ten inches apart.

- **Dill (*Anethum graveolens*)**

Probably the most popular use of this fragrant herb is in dill pickles. However, the slender shoots also make a tasty addition to salads, vegetables, and main dishes like fish.

Sow dill seed into the garden when all danger of frost has passed in spring. Dill reaches two to three feet high and quickly goes to seed in the summer heat. Pick stems just as flowers bloom.

Dill is a prolific self-seeding plant. Harvested seeds can be used either dried or fresh.

Swallowtail butterfly larva (large green caterpillars) feed on dill. Rather than to fight a losing battle, it's best to plant more dill than you believe you'll use.

- **Marjoram (*Origanum majorana*)**

When looking for sweet marjoram, you may find it classed as *Majorana hortensis* and *Majorana majorana* as well as *Origanum majorana*.

This petite annual reaches only 12-inches in height. Although often substituted for oregano, a pleasing fragrance and velvety gray foliage make sweet marjoram a popular favorite as an ornamental herb as well as a culinary herb.

Sow seeds outdoors in early spring when soil temperatures reach about 60°F. Sweet marjoram is also a naturally sweet addition to an indoor herb garden.

- **Parsley (*Petroselinum crispum*)**

Parsley is actually a biennial, but you'll have the best luck growing it if you treat it as an annual and plant it every spring.

Although it is aggravatingly slow at germinating, the best way to propagate parsley is through seed. For best results start seeds indoors six to eight weeks before you expect the last frost.

Since it reaches only a foot tall, parsley is also an excellent plant for your indoor herb garden.

- **Summer Savory (*Satureja hortensis*)**

Savory grows up to 18-inches tall. Foliage is green with a bronze tone and a peppery flavor that makes a "spicy" herbal addition to cooking. Sow summer savory seed into your spring herb garden. Because of its petite size, summer savory is also a candidate for indoor culinary herb gardens.

### ***Perennial Herbs***

- **Bay Laurel (*Laurus nobilis*)**

The bay laurel is a small evergreen tree and the source of the bay leaf. Frequently not hardy as a young plant, the bay laurel tree is an excellent choice for container growing.

Bay laurel trees require a yearly pruning to keep them from reaching their standard 40-foot height. However, generally the size of the pot helps to control the size of tree. When planted in a one-foot diameter pot, the bay laurel generally reaches only about five feet in height. With only regular waterings, bi-monthly fertilization, and annual top dressing of compost or nutrient rich soil, the bay laurel will thrive in the same container for up to six years. Move pots indoors in winter to a cool area that provides indirect light.

Find bay laurel transplants in autumn or mid-spring at nurseries and garden centers.

- **Chives (*Allium schoenoprasum*)**

Native to the Orient, chives betray their flavor with a distinctive yet subtle onion-like fragrance.

Propagated easily by seed or division, chives grow in grassy clumps from 10 to 18-inches tall and are prolific at self-seeding when allowed to go to seed. Harvest chive leaves at about two inches from the ground. As with many other herbs, it's chives are at their most flavorful before they go to bloom.

*Garlic* chives (*Allium tuberosum*) have a garlic scent and flavor. Their leaves are flatter and longer than those of *A.schoenoprasum*. After harvest, preserve either type of chives by either drying or freezing.

- **Fennel (*Foeniculum officinalis*)**

Fennel is a perennial herb that looks like dill, but has a very distinctive licorice scent and flavor.

Like dill, fennel also attracts swallowtail butterflies. Fennel is best grown in a patio pot placed in full sun. The herb grows up to 4 feet tall and self-seeds to the point of being quite invasive.

Use young fennel leaves with fish and just about any Italian dish. Fennel seeds are also used in many sauces and to flavor sausage.

- **Lemongrass (*Cymbopogon citratus*)**

Lemon grass is an aromatic tropical grass that provides the subtle taste and smell of lemon with a bright edge of ginger.

Lemon grass grows in cascading clumps that can reach up to 6-feet high and 3-feet in diameter and produces sharp blades that are ready for harvest when they reach a quarter to a half inch in diameter. Lemon grass is usually propagated by bulb planting or division of a mature clump.

- **Lovage (*Levisticum officinale*)**

Sweeten up your turkey stuffing, soup, or salad with lovage. Similar to celery in taste, but sweeter and with a more robust flavor, lovage can reach to six feet in height.

The usual way to propagate lovage is through division, but it can also be grown from seed sown in late summer or very early spring. Once established, lovage readily self-seeds and is hardy in zones 4 to 8.

- **Mint (*Mentha*)**

*Spearmint* (*M. spicata*) and *peppermint* (*M.x piperita*) are the two most popular mints to grow.

Almost all mints are hardy perennials, vigorous growers, and diligent reseeder. Although their fragrance is absolutely wonderful, mint really does need its own little corner of the world. Many a gardener has fallen in love with the fragrances of fresh mint cultivars, only to find that in a season or two, their garden is overrun with the stuff! One way to keep mint in check is to regularly harvest leaves before your mint cultivars blossom.

Propagate mint by division and plant transplants in sunken clay pots to keep them from spreading out of bounds.

- **Oregano (*Origanum vulgare*)**

Oregano, although known as wild marjoram, has coarser leaves and a fragrance



more similar to thyme than sweet marjoram.

Plants grow to two feet in height and adapt well to containers. Although oregano is a perennial, beds need to be replanted every three to four years when stems become woody. Propagate oregano either by seed or by division.

Unlike most cooking herbs, oregano leaves are their most flavorful after they have been dried.

- **Rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*)**

The quickest way to grow rosemary is from small plants purchased at your favorite nursery. Although rosemary seed can be sown directly into the garden, seed is slow to germinate and beginning growth is slow as well.

Because rosemary is hardy in only warmer climates (zones 8 – 10), most gardeners prefer to grow it in outdoor pots and bring it indoors during the cold season. However, before bringing rosemary indoors, do remember to acclimate it in a “reverse” hardening off. Bring it in for short times and set it back out again, increasing the indoor length of time slowly for a couple of weeks.

Over-winter rosemary in a cool area of your home.

A mature rosemary plant can reach from 4 to 6-feet tall and be nearly as wide.

- **Sage (*Salvia officinalis*)**

The distinctive scent and flavor of sage almost spells stuffing to your senses! Sage is a popular cooking herb widely used in poultry stuffings and as a flavor for soups and stews.

Depending on cultivar, mature sage reaches from two to four feet in height. Colorful foliage ranging from gray green to deep purple makes sage an attractive addition to an herb garden as well as a flavorful one to your recipes.

- **(Winter) Savory (*Satureja montana*)**

Although winter savory isn't as “sweet” as summer savory, it is still a favorite herb for seasoning meat dishes. Also different from its annual relative, winter savory is a woody perennial that reaches from one to two feet-tall.

Winter savory is most often propagated from cuttings, although it also grows from seed.

Nearly an evergreen, winter savory leaves can be harvested at almost any time, but best retain their pungent flavor when dried and stored for winter use.

- **Tarragon**

Tarragon is an International favorite. French tarragon (*Artemisia dracunculus*) Russian tarragon (*Artemisia dracunculoides*), and Mexican tarragon (*Tagetes lucida*) are used for seasoning vinegars, butters, rice, vegetables, and nearly all types of meat.

French tarragon is a woody perennial. Propagated from stem cuttings or division, French tarragon grows up to two feet high. Of the three varieties of tarragon, French tarragon is the most popular.

Russian tarragon is also a perennial but is distinguished by coarser growth and a more bitter taste than French Tarragon.

Mexican tarragon is actually the *mint marigold*. Because it is heat and drought resistant, Mexican tarragon is grown often in warm climates as a substitute for French or Russian cultivars.

- **Thyme (Thymus vulgaris)**

The woody growth of this low growing perennial adds to its charm. Thyme's wiry stems generally reach no more than 10 inches high. Both the gray-green leaves and lilac tinted flowers are very aromatic, but for cooking, it's best to cut stems when the first flowers begin to bloom.

Thyme is propagated by cuttings, division, and direct seeding. Thyme is at home as a bed edging or an addition to a rock garden and is comfortable in an indoor garden as well.

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## About Gardening-Guides.com

HDK-BeheerBV company is the parent company of Gardening-Guides.com. Started in 2004, Gardening-Guides.com is the brainchild of webmaster Hans Dekker. It's his vision to offer you a panoramic view of gardening.



In addition to being the trailblazer for Gardening-Guides.com, Hans is also a talented Internet businessman and owner of Net Research, Netherlands. Starting with just a few articles on Holland bulbs and tulips, Hans has not only used his Internet expertise to grow a virtual garden that holds dozens of cultivars, but he has also cultivated a team of talented writers that provides you with ever-fresh news and insights into every type of gardening you can imagine.

The mission of gardening-guides.com is to provide you, the gardener with quality information about year-round gardening, garden related topics and the resources you need to find the plants, tools, and other gardening products you need to grow a successful and satisfying garden.

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**Gardening-guides.com**

**HDK Beheer BV**

**Kantershof 248**

**1104GM Amsterdam**

**Netherlands**