



NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

Have You Tried Growing Herbs? (December 30, 2023)

by Anne Skinner, Tulare/Kings Counties Master Gardener

Herbs could be called plants for everyone. They can be grown in a pot on the patio as well as out in the garden. They can be used as an extra flavor in your dinner, as an ornamental, or for their scent. There are many culinary uses of fresh or dried herbs, and growing your own saves money, in addition to unmatched fresh flavor. Herbs sold in the produce section of the market are pricey and not at their best from traveling and storage. Fresh herbs can make a simple dish look and taste like you have some serious chef skills. Most cultures use fresh herbs in their delicious home-cooked meals.



Herbs can be annual- completing their lifecycle in one season; perennial- continuing to grow for more than two years; or biennial- taking two years to mature and set seed. Culinary herbs are edible aromatic herbaceous plants used for flavoring and color. They can reduce the addition of extra salt, sugar, and fats in cooking. Leafy herbs are best cut finely to release the most flavor and added at the end of cooking the dish. More woody herbs such as rosemary or bay are added as the dish is prepared to flavor the meat or

sauce. Fresh herbs have the advantage of adding flavor to a dish without the possible bitterness or unpredictable taste of purchased dried herbs.

Herbs like our Mediterranean climate

Rosemary has more tender new growth in spring/summer but can be harvested for cooking all year. It also becomes a medium to large shrub in the garden, with blue flowers in early spring. Oregano and sage have usable leaves all year but are more vigorous from early spring until frost. Thyme makes a great ground cover and is ready for use all year. Bay shrubs can become a moderate size ornamental in addition to providing bay leaves for many tasty dishes. Chives in a pot on the porch will be ready any time to garnish your baked potato.

There is some seasonality in growing herbs in the Central Valley. Cilantro, dill, and parsley do better in cooler months, while basil and mint prefer the warmer days. Mint and parsley do require moist, well-drained, and loose soil, but their needs can easily be accommodated in a pot or planter. In the hottest parts of summer, some shade is appreciated by mint, chives, and parsley. Too much shade can lead to thin plants, which are more prone to diseases and pests.

Herbs are generally less prone to pest damage.

Many herbs are fairly strong in scent and flavor, such as rosemary, which is only prone to spittlebugs, a nuisance that can be hosed off. Thyme, sage, and oregano also have rare pest issues. Leafy herbs such as parsley and basil do require surveillance for earwigs and snails. Last year, I had little caterpillars attacking the basil, but they were easily handpicked off.

Woody herbs in the garden are low-water users.

Rosemary, thyme, bay, and lavender require good drainage and need to be in an area with similar drought-tolerant plants. While they can be grown in pots, close monitoring of the soil moisture is necessary to prevent water-logged roots. Woody herbs tolerate alkaline and poor soils and, once established, can be watered using a soaker hose at 2-3 week intervals, depending on the air temperature.

Herbs have many uses.

Lavender can grow into a medium to large shrub with purple to lavender flowers from early spring through late summer, and it attracts bees. The strongly scented flowers can be used in potpourri, and the scent is soothing. Rosemary sprigs in a cone-shaped base make a scented little green "tree" for a holiday decoration. With a bit of care, some herbs can be overwintered as a houseplant and provide fresh leaves in the winter.

Choosing which herbs to grow

On the Master Gardener website, choose local gardening information, then vegetables, herbs, and gourds, then herbs. This will bring up Basic Herbs for a Kitchen Garden. The chart lists the herb, botanical name, plant size, when to plant, if a seed or seedling is best, the harvest time, sun requirements, minimum soil depth, potential pests, and uses of the herb. It also includes tips for drying herbs and preparation for storage of herbs to be used as seeds. The chart is a class in culinary herbs. Download here:

https://ucanr.edu/sites/UC_Master_Gardeners/files/139132.pdf

The choice between starting with a seed or a seedling often depends on the amount of time you have to garden. Seeds are usually less expensive, but some require more care to produce a usable plant. Advantages to starting an edible plant from seed include having the exact variety of herbs you wish and knowing it was raised organically. Young seedlings are often small and can be easily squashed by little fingers. I have found snails making off with pieces of parsley. Parsley will sprout faster if the seeds are soaked overnight in warm water, then planted in a pot and kept indoors for a couple of weeks.

Mint and rosemary can be grown from stem cuttings. Mint has a well-earned reputation for spreading in the garden. It is often planted in a pot or separate space to avoid overrunning other plants. In Spanish, yerba buena refers to a number of aromatic plants in the mint family and is a plant with many uses.

If you purchase an herb plant, choose the healthiest specimen with lush growth, and a smaller size is not a bad choice. Often, the small, healthy plant will grow faster than a larger specimen. Keeping the new purchase separate from your other plants for a few days to monitor for pests and diseases is always a good idea.

Growing herbs in the garden has many benefits, and it's not difficult to be successful. The aromatic leaves also create a pleasant garden walk as a stress reliever.

The Tulare-Kings Counties Master Gardeners will answer your questions in person:

Visalia Farmer's Market, 1st & 3rd Saturdays, 8 - 11 am, Tulare Co. Courthouse North parking lot

Questions? Call the Master Gardeners:

Tulare County: (559) 684-3325, Tues & Thurs, 9:30-11:30;

Kings County: (559) 852-2736, Thursday Only, 9:30-11:30 a.m

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