

# HERB GARDENING – NATURALLY!

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## INTRODUCTION

Garden is artificial by definition.

1. Healthy, nitrogen-rich, tender plants are yummy to pests as well as humans
2. Plants have lots of needs. Soil: fertility, pH, texture. Temperature optimum for germination and for growth. Photoperiod. Space requirements. Water. **THE MORE OPTIMUM THE SITE, SOIL, TEMPERATURE, WATERING, SPACE, TIMING, AND SUNLIGHT, THE LESS WORK YOU WILL HAVE AND THE FEWER THE PESTS YOU WILL BE BATTLING.** The most successful gardener does what the plants need, not what is convenient for the gardener. Happy plants are healthy plants. Stressed plants may become sickly.

## GARDEN LOCATION:

1. Many herbs prefer a warm, sunny location with fair to good drainage. Some may be successfully grown in partial shade or in a heavier soil, but greatest health, vigor, fragrance, and taste will result if optimal conditions are met. A few herbs prefer a shaded or moist location.
2. In practice, many people keep the majority of their herbs in a separate garden from other flowers or ornamentals. This allows the gardener to focus attention more easily on the culinary, fragrance, medicinal, historical, or aesthetic aspects of these particular plantings.
3. Often the culinary herb garden is located in or near the vegetable garden, since both have similar light requirements and need to be visited frequently for weeding and harvesting.
4. Many herbs are highly ornamental and can be planted either alone or mixed with other annuals and perennials to for a great visual effect.
5. Most herbs adapt well to pots and other containers, whether indoors or out; others insist on having their roots in the ground. Growing herbs in pots takes a bit more attention to avoid stressful conditions. Almost all plant in pots must be fertilized at least occasionally.

## MULCHES

1. Why? Smother weeds; manipulate soil/root temperature and moisture; decrease need for irrigation; add nutrients to soil and improve soil texture; protect soil from erosion; control disease.
2. Organic: **cools soil**; keeps soil moist; smothers most weeds; encourages earthworms; encourages rodents, slugs, and some diseases; good erosion control; usually free or cheap. May contain weed seed.
3. Synthetic (poly films and black paper): **warms soil**; keeps soil moist; black or green smother all weeds, white and clear do not; helps control many diseases; does not promote slugs; does not improve soil texture or fertility; not recyclable, re-usable, or biodegradable; usually expensive.

## DISEASES.

1. Pay attention to timing, spacing, mulches, watering, and fertilizing. Prevent stress. Stressed plants are more likely to develop disease, especially mildews.
2. Identify the disease and read about methods to control it.
3. As a last resort, if both you and the disease are being stubborn, use an organic spray material. Usually prevent further spread only (do not cure existing disease). Powdery mildew may respond to treatment with a solution of baking soda in water. Recipe: 1 tsp baking soda, 1/2 tsp horticultural/dormant oil, 2 drops liquid soap in 1 quart SOFT water (distilled water, rain water, or snow melt; NOT tap water). Or try neem oil or potassium bicarbonate. **READ THE LABEL.**
4. Damping off is when fungal or bacterial organisms attack the tender stem of very young seedlings at the soil line and cause the plant to collapse. Sprinkle the soil of susceptible plants with a very fine, very light dusting of peat moss. You should still be able to see the soil after application.

**COOL SEASON HERBS.** Get growing early in spring and thrive in cool weather. Most continue to grow well on through the summer heat (except cilantro and chervil). Some continue late into the fall, such as parsley, lovage, calendula and nasturtiums. All grow best in average soil with average water and fertility. Do not need to fertilize if growing on local clay soils. Heavy soil can be amended with compost and other organic materials. All will tolerate some shade but should still have at least 4-6 hours of sun, preferably in the morning.

#### **CILANTRO**

- Easily grown from seed. Plants are short lived, especially above 75 degrees! Plant every few weeks from seed. If seeding will mature in hot weather, plant in filtered shade or in pots indoors in air conditioning!
- Pick older, larger leaves. Pick off ferny stems (beginning to flower). Will self seed.
- Pests: none
- Use fresh only. Use sparingly if you do not know your audience! Some people find the taste objectionable. Easy to use too much. Most famously used in Mexican salsa. Try it in hearty and marinated salads with grains, beans, corn, tomatoes. Add to tacos or enchiladas at the last minute.

#### **PARSLEY**

- Soak seeds for 24 hours before planting. Seeds good for only one year. Italian parsley may bolt (flower prematurely) if planted very early indoors in spring. Wait until April to seed.
- Curled parsley is milder, prettier, and soft on the tongue. Best choice for fresh use: salads, dips, garnish. Italian (plain leaf) parsley is stronger and has a rough texture on the tongue. Best choice for cooking. Great breath freshener, especially after eating garlic. High vitamin content.
- Pests: black swallowtail caterpillars; occasionally deer

#### **DILL**

- Two main types: “fernleaf” – stays short and is slow to go to seed; produces leaves or “dill weed” for a few months. Tall dills (“Dukat”, “Superdukat”, “Bouquet”) grow quickly and go to seed quickly. Use these if you want seed heads for pickles. Tall varieties best if planted every few weeks from seed.
- Pests: black swallowtail caterpillars.
- Remove flowers unless you want it to self-seed.

#### **CHIVES**

- Two main varieties: onion chives (pink flowers in spring) and garlic chives (white flowers in late summer). Both are moderately invasive. Pick spent flowers off to prevent self-seeding. No pests.
- Pick older, larger leaves and also flowers. Cut onion chives down hard after flowering.

#### **LOVAGE**

- One variety. Very large plant; must be grown in the ground. Flavor of celery with a touch of parsley. Cut back flower stalks in June as they are forming and keep yellow leaves trimmed off. No pests.
- Use raw or cooked. Great as a “background” herb for tomato soup, tomato juice, roasted tomatoes.

#### **OTHER COOL SEASON HERBS**

- **Fennel.** 6 or more hours of sun, moderate water. Bronze or smoky fennel is perennial, self-seeds. Bulbing fennel is an annual vegetable. Only pest is swallowtails again.
- **Mint.** Keep in a pot. Do not plant in the ground unless you want it to go everywhere. Prune back to prevent flowering. Many pests: aphids, 7-lined plant bug, spider mites. May get powdery mildew.
- **Chervil.** Annual, preferring cool shade. Usually does not last the whole season. Self-seeds. No pests.
- **Nasturtium.** Grows best with afternoon shade. Eat flowers and leaves. Long blooming; no pests. Nick seed coat to promote germination.

**WARM SEASON AND MEDITERRANEAN HERBS.** Get growing slowly in spring. Need warm temperatures to germinate or to emerge from overwintering. Thrive in summer heat and love full sun, well-drained soil. Some like gravelly or sandy low fertility soil.

### **BASIL**

- **HATES COLD WEATHER!** Do not plant outside until nights are above 50 (June 5-10). Can be grown inside, but needs lots of light, including long days. Think **HOT** and **SUNNY**. Easy to grow from seeds. Start 3-4 weeks earlier indoors. Plant a few seeds outside at the end of June for fresh plants during tomato season.
- Pick tips, including all flower buds. Do not pick single large leaves. The more you pick, the more you get! One of the few herbs that benefits from fertilizer (especially nitrogen) which promotes continued growth. Can use compost, fish emulsion, seaweed. Needs regular water (1-2 inches per week)
- Pests: slugs and grasshoppers, occasionally aphids, especially on young plants indoors.
- Diseases: may succumb to various fungal stem diseases, but usually only if stressed and especially in pots.
- Use raw or add to hot foods a few minutes before serving; prolonged heating destroys the flavor. Extremely versatile herb. Try all the different ones: lemon, lime, cinnamon, large leaf types, purple basil, small leaf "bush" basil, Thai, etc.

### **OREGANO**

- Many varieties. Best culinary variety is Greek oregano (best flavor and production), with tiny white flowers. Likes hot sun and average soil with good drainage. Purple flowered variety ("common oregano") has inferior flavor and is very invasive.
- Pick tips or whole stems. Cut back hard when it starts to grow tall in June (getting ready to flower).
- Primarily used dried or in cooking. Excellent in all Italian cuisine that has tomatoes (think pizza, lasagna, and spaghetti!). Essential base for Italian seasoning: blend of oregano, basil, thyme, marjoram, rosemary.

### **THYME**

- Many varieties. German (or "winter") thyme and lemon thyme (the all green variety) are hardy perennials. French thyme and orange thyme are not hardy (overwinter indoors). Many thymes are ornamental only.
- Pick tips in small amounts frequently. Do not harvest more than one fourth of the plant in the fall or it will not survive the winter. Easy to dry.
- Primarily used dried or in cooking. Important in Italian seasoning. Used with basil and oregano in marinara sauce and to make spaghetti, pizza, lasagna. Excellent in cream of tomato soup.

### **SWEET MARJORAM**

- Tender or tropical perennial. Can be wintered indoors. Small plant with sweet herbal flavor.
- Pick tips to promote bushiness. Keep flowers picked off. Easy to dry.
- Add at the end of cooking. Tomato soup. Chop fresh on sliced tomatoes. Marinated salads. Stuffed tomatoes (see parsley). Very versatile. Essential in French cooking.

### **GARDEN SAGE**

- Most silver varieties are winter hardy (common garden sage; Berggarten; dwarf). The colored sages are less hardy. Golden sage will overwinter for a few years but not tricolor or purple. Winter these indoors bloom.
- Likes sun and heat, average to dry soil, lower fertility. Blooms on old wood, so prune following spring.
- Pests: occasionally aphids, leafhoppers, 7-lined plant bug. Powdery mildew.

## LAVENDER

- Many varieties. Hidcote and Munstead are the most hardy. Grosso (Fat Spike) and Provence will overwinter some years. Goodwin Creek, Spanish lavender, and French lavender must be wintered indoors (tender perennials).
- All require full sun and excellent drainage. The crown must not sit in wet soil, especially in winter. Rocky or gravelly soils with lower fertility are ideal. No insect pests but may occasionally develop foliar disease (mildew) in pots if stressed.
- Prune in spring ONLY after you see strong growth beginning at the BOTTOM of the plant (top growth begins 2-4 weeks earlier). This is usually in May but can be June after an exceptionally hard winter.
- Used in baked goods, confections, beverages, and many French dishes. Usually included in "Herbs de Provence" blend.

## ROSEMARY

- All varieties are tender perennials and must be wintered indoors. They like well-drained soil, average water and fertility, lots of sun.
- Pests: occasionally aphids and leafhoppers. Powdery mildew fairly common when stressed. Create conditions unfavorable to PM (air movement, good light and water, do not fertilize excessively; do NOT mist your plants!) If PM develops, treat with baking soda solution at first sign.
- Late winter in pots in house: rosemary is coming out of dormancy about Valentine's Day and is hungry and thirsty. Be sure to fertilize and greatly increase water as needed (soil gets dry fast!).
- Other winter tips: plants are dormant mid- Nov to mid Feb. Do not fertilize or mist. Water only when soil is dry.

## Other Mediterranean and warm weather herbs

- **Pineapple Sage.** Tender Perennial. Average light and water. Bright red flowers from Sept to Christmas if protected from freezing. Keep pruning hard early in season to promote bushy shape. Pests: occasional spider mites, aphids. Nice for teas, salads, dressings, desserts.
- **Lemongrass.** Tender perennial. Average light and water. Grow in garden or larger pot for best production. No pests.
- **Lemon Verbena.** Tender perennial. Sun; average to light water. Goes dormant and drops foliage in winter, even indoors. Pests: Spider mites; occasionally aphids. Use for teas, jellies, baking, vegetable dishes.
- **Savory.** Winter savory is perennial while summer savory is an annual. Pests: occasionally aphids or 7 lined plant bug on summer savory. Prune winter savory back to green tissue in spring. German herb used especially with beans.
- **French Tarragon.** Hardy perennial. Needs well drained soil and full sun. No pests. Spring and early summer growth has best flavor. Try pruning it in July for fresh growth.

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