

Herb Basics: Growing Herbs

Herbs for the farm kitchen, for use in herbal medicines, herbal tea fanciers and herb crafters are growing herbs on their own. Learn the herb basics to begin your own herb garden.

by Sue Weaver

Raised Herb Beds

Gardening author and PBS television horticulture expert, Mel Bartholomew, shows how to craft raised herb beds in his video, "Introducing Square Foot Gardening" and book, *Cash From Square Foot Gardening* (Rodale Press; 2000), or learn to build them online at: "Gardening in Raised Beds" "Raised Bed Gardening" A few decades ago, even country dwellers bought tired, desiccated herbs in tins and bottles at the grocery store.

Now, taste-conscious cooks, along with practitioners of herbal medicine, herbal tea fanciers and herb crafters are growing herbs on their own.

The word "herb" means many things to many people. To botanists, an herb is a soft-stemmed perennial plant that dies back each fall and renews itself come spring.

To most of us, an herb is a tasty culinary seasoning, an ingredient in beverage tea or fragrant potpourris and shampoos, or even a type of natural medicine.

Throughout the millennia, herbs have become everyday staples of shamans, wise women and campfire cooks.

Herbs for Profit

Herbs are addictive. Oh, not in the usual sense, but when folks discover the joy of growing, gathering and working with glorious herbs, they want to learn more, do more, until invariably they wonder,

"Could I make money growing herbs?"

The answer: You likely can.

It's difficult yet doable to launch a successful herb-crop venture, but easier to grow an herb business greenhouse—growing herb plants for gardeners, offering workshops, making and marketing herbal crafts or products, or selling fresh herbs to natural health practitioners and upscale chefs, or at farmers' markets and roadside stands.

Before you decide, investigate. Read and pick the brains of other herbal entrepreneurs. The resources are out there; here's where to find them.

No matter what sort of herb business you're thinking of, contact ATTRA (Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural Areas) or visit their site to download their herb growers' publications, especially *Herb Overview: A Horticultural Systems Guide*. A toll-free call to ATTRA will get you a free, custom-assembled packet of information tailored for your needs.

ATTRA
<http://attra.ncat.org>
P.O. Box 3657
Fayetteville, AR 72702
(800) 346-9140

Find links to downloadable ATTRA publications, plus links to hundreds of other small-scale farming resources.

For the USDA take on herb businesses, visit:

“Herbs: A Small-Scale Agriculture Alternative”

And don't miss their “Herbs and Herb Gardening: An Annotated Bibliography and Resource Guide”

And get acquainted with the Herb Growing and Marketing Network: A discussion board, classifieds, and a comprehensive “herbalpedia” are a few of the goodies at this site.

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Five thousand-year-old Chinese texts explain the use of herbal drugs. The Edwin Smith Papyrus and the Ebers Papyrus, penned by ancient Egyptian physicians in 1600 and 1500 B.C.E. describe more than 700 herbs and 800 recipes.

During the middle ages, herbalism flourished in European monasteries and convents. One of the best early day herbals, the Book of Healing Herbs, was compiled by German abbess, Hildegard of Bingen, during the 12th century C.E.

In those days before refrigeration, cooks in high places used garden herbs and expensive spices from the East to mask the rank aromas and flavors of rancid meat. The serf's wife flavored her family's gruel with herbs from forest and field. In castle and croft, fragrant herbs strewn underfoot made the scent of unwashed bodies less oppressive. And everywhere, physicians and wise women passed herbal knowledge along to a next generation of healers. While herbs were important throughout the antiquities, they have never been as popular and widely used as they are today.

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GROWING HERBS

Most herbs are easy to grow—even for fledgling gardeners. For green-thumb gardeners, herbs are a snap. While specific herbs prefer certain soils, watering and lighting conditions, most will meet you part way. Once established, they rarely require fertilizing and most are pest-free.

Nearly all herbs prefer full sun, meaning eight or more hours of direct sunlight each day. But many perform admirably with far less sun, and some thrive in dappled shade.

Going to sell on a smaller scale? Read this.

If you'd like to sell on a smaller scale, race to your nearest bookstore or Amazon online and order *Growing Your Herb Business* by Bertha Reppert (Storey Books; 1994). You'll find helpful excerpts, including “Ten Common Mistakes In a Start-Up Herb Business.”

Whatever your interest, there is probably an herb business for you. But do your homework before you decide.

It's the business-savvy thing to do.

“Growing Herbs” from Purdue University

“Growing Herbs at Home” from University of Missouri-Columbia

“Harvesting and Preserving Herbs for the Home Gardener”
North Carolina State University

“Flavored Vinegars”
University of Georgia

TopPlop herbs into average, everyday garden soil and they're happy. In fact, herbs grown in super-enriched soil produce low-flavor foliage. Herbs are simple plants, but they won't tolerate soggy soil, although a few, like mint, prefer fairly moist

digs. If your soil is heavy, rocky or damp, consider a raised-herb garden (see “Raised Herb Beds” below). Once you’ve chosen a spot for your herb garden, cultivate the soil to a depth of 12 to 18 inches, tossing stones, dirt clods and other debris; then spade or till in three to four inches of organic compost—homemade or from the gardening store. Voila, that’s it!

Next, you’ll need plants. While herbs can be grown from seed, cuttings, root divisions or by layering, today’s garden centers market a mind-boggling array of herb seedlings that are ready to be popped in your garden. They’re a beginning herb grower’s best bet.

Herbs are classified as annuals, biennials or perennials. Some are more frost-sensitive than others. When selecting potted herbs, choose compact beauties with healthy-looking foliage and sturdy stems. Small plants transplant best. Unless the plants were displayed outdoors all day at the garden center, they will need to be “hardened off” before being planted. Beginning a week to 10 days before planting, carry them outdoors to a sheltered, shaded spot for a few hours each day, gradually leaving them out longer and longer. Water them in the evenings and bring them indoors overnight.

To prevent transplant shock you’ll want to plant them on an overcast or drizzly evening, not a sunny day. Plant annuals and tender perennials after your area’s last spring frost. Water the herbs right before you begin.

Scoop out a hole deep and wide enough to accommodate your plant’s root ball. Gently pinch its stem, upend the pot and tap the bottom until your herb slips out. Arrange it in the hole so its roots aren’t crowded and it sets at the exact depth it did in the pot. Carefully backfill around the plant’s roots. Coax soil around them and lightly tamp it in place—you want to eliminate air pockets. Take care not to pack new soil atop the stem.

Gently pat to firm the surface around your herb, give it a slow, deep drink, and move on to the next plant. Water your transplants daily until new growth sprouts. After that, an inch of rainfall per week is sufficient.

Pinching off tips helps herbs like basil grow bushier, and pinched tips make mighty fine eating. Begin judiciously harvesting herbs as soon as the plants are established.

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HARVESTING AND STORING HERBS

You can safely harvest up to one-third of a well-grown perennial herb’s foliage at a clip; midsummer, snip most annuals three inches from the ground. Both regrow nicely.

Harvest herbs on a calm, clear morning as soon as dew has lifted. Most herbs are best gathered when flower buds are forming but before the flowers unfurl. Gather only the material you can process in an hour. Don’t wash harvested herbs unless it’s absolutely necessary and avoid oven and microwave drying methods, all of which zap precious aromatic oils.

Instead, using twine or rubber bands, bundle herbs in small bunches and suspend them heads down in a warm, airy, shaded place such as a well-ventilated attic, porch or outbuilding. Strip leaves and flowers from stems when they’re dry and crunchy.

To gather seeds, slip a small paper bag over each bundle of drying flower heads. Seeds tumble into the bag as they mature; or strew a single layer of stripped fresh leaves and flowers on muslin-covered window screens set atop two sawhorses. Stir them every day.

Stow crumbled herbs in air-tight containers away from light, moisture and heat. Plastic works for culinary herbs but herbalists recommend storing medicinal herbs in crockery or glass. Label them; many dried herbs look alike.

Some herbs, especially chives and basil, are better frozen. To freeze herbs, chop and pack them in ice cube trays, then top them with water or stock. Or freeze stripped leaves on cookie sheets. Whichever method you choose, pack frozen herbs in freezer containers and use them in cooking but not as garnish. Pop herbal “ice cubes” directly into soups and stews or thaw them in a strainer.

Another fine way to preserve culinary herbs is as herbal vinegar. To make it you’ll need a selection of bottles with non-metallic lids, vinegar—white, apple cider, red wine, white wine, sherry, each has its own distinct flavor and all work equally well—and a supply of garden fresh herbs, factored at the rate of one cup of loosely packed herb to two cups of vinegar. Bruise the herbs, pack them into a clean bottle, then pour on your vinegar. Cap the bottle tightly and store it away in a cool, dark place to steep for two to six weeks. Shake it every few days and begin tasting after the first week. When

you like it, it's done.

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TRANSPLANTING INDOORS

Many herbs happily move indoors at summer's end. Dig vigorous, healthy plants before first frost, taking care not to damage their roots.

Have their new homes ready and waiting.

To house an herb, dribble an inch of drainage gravel in each pot and use a light, all-purpose potting soil. A good mixture is one part coarse sand, perlite or vermiculite to two parts commercial potting soil. Indoor herbs need lots of light.

Arrange them in south- or west-facing windows. Don't overwater potted herbs; poke your finger one-half inch into the growing medium—if it's still moist, don't water. Indoor herbs are more pest-prone than their outdoor kin; watch for pesky aphids, spider mites, whiteflies and thrips.

And herbs left outside? Chuck dead annuals after your first hard frost. When the ground freezes, bed hardy perennials with a four- to six-inch layer of loose mulch. Good ones include oak leaves, straw, pine needles or evergreen boughs. Fluff it in early spring before new growth pops the earth's surface and remove winter mulch after spring growth is established.

For a first herb garden consider planting basil, chives, dill, oregano, rosemary, marjoram, sage and thyme—eight tasty, versatile, exceptionally easy-to-grow culinary herbs.

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BASIC HERBS

Basil

Everyone loves basil. It's the primary ingredient in pesto and a must-have for Thai and Mediterranean cookery. Add its tangy leaves and fresh flowers to salads or accent lamb, poultry, fish, cheese and egg dishes with basil. It adds zest to mild-tasting veggies like zucchini and eggplant, and is a natural for seasoning carrots.

Basil is a tender annual, so it mustn't venture outdoors until after last frost. Pinch it back to promote new growth. Basil dries well but is better frozen. Store cut basil in a cool, but not cold, location—its leaves turn brown when temps fall below 40 degrees F.

With more than 50 varieties to choose from, there are basil to delight every eye and palate—basils with green, purple or variegated foliage, tall basil, bush basil, basil tasting of lemon and cinnamon. A native of India, this versatile herb has been cultivated for at least 5,000 years.

Chives

No herb is easier grown than chives. Mega-hardy and drought-resistant, it thrives in most soils, even in partial shade. Its deep green, tubular leaves are among the first plants to break dormancy come spring. Chives' pinky-purple ball-shaped flowers make it pretty enough to grow as an ornamental.

After it flowers, snip chives two inches from the ground; it rallies and regrows in weeks. Harvest chives with scissors to avoid bruising the juicy leaves. Like basil, chives are better frozen than dried.

Chives are an ingredient of "fines herbes," a mixture used to flavor fish, poultry and eggs. It works in soups, stews, salads, sauces, marinades, mushrooms, in herb butters and sour cream potato toppers, any place a hint of onion is needed. Dill
Grow dill for tasty seeds (use them to flavor pickles, soups, salads, cheese and baked goods) or dillweed—its lacy, feathery leaves.

Dillweed enlivens fish dishes, cottage cheese, baked potatoes, egg or cucumber salads and just about any vegetable you can name. It's a staple in Greek cuisine. Dill attracts bees to your garden and smells great in potpourri. Nursing moms drink dillweed tea to increase milk flow. Dill is an all-purpose herb.

You'll find dill plants at garden centers, but it grows best from seed. Trace one-quarter to one-half inch furrows, dribble in the tiny seeds, sprinkle a scant bit of soil over them and pat down. Water and wait just 10 days to sprouting; eight weeks to seed! Sweet Marjoram and Oregano

These Mediterranean natives are closely related yet different enough in flavor and growing pattern to be considered separate herbs. Marjoram is sweetly spicy; oregano's pungent balsamic spiciness packs more of a wallop.

Marjoram shines in poultry stuffing and nicely accents eggs, cheese, fish, mushrooms and a wide array of vegetables. Fresh, it's great in salads. Marjoram tea soothes tension headaches and tummy ills and tastes great, too.

Oregano adores tomatoes, loves beef and lamb (toss a fistful of fresh oregano on the coals when grilling meat), seafood and eggplant. No pizza is right without oregano!

Oregano tolerates poor soils, drought and partial shade. Marjoram is pickier but not by much. Rosemary is tough. It loves sun and well-drained soil but endures heat and severe pruning, and some varieties are winter hardy to as much as 10 below zero.

It's an amazingly versatile herb. Use it to season lamb and other meats, poultry, shellfish, cheese, eggs, mushrooms and a host of vegetables. Fragrant rosemary works in potpourri, makes lovely cold beverage tea and as a rinse it darkens hair. Rosemary has been cultivated and revered since at least 5000 B.C.E. Sage Would stuffing be the same without sage? This strong-flavored herb beautifully seasons poultry, meats, fish and cheese (but don't use too much) and is widely used in homemade herbal medicine. Its Latin name, *Salvia*, means "to heal."

Sage is a handsome, woody-stemmed sprawling plant with pebbled, nappy gray-green leaves. Its wee purple flowers attract butterflies to your garden. Sage is easily grown and with protection, winter hardy throughout much of the United States.

Thyme
Low-growing, woody, wiry thyme is an ingredient in "bouquet garni" and "herbes de Provence" mixtures, and a huge variety of French and Italian recipes. Tomato dishes love thyme. It complements poultry stuffings, meats, seafood, eggs and cheese.

Gardeners may choose from over 100 varieties of thyme—there are thymes to please every palate. The plant tolerates drought astonishingly well and given plenty of sun, thyme excels as a potted indoor herb.

These are eight great choices for your first herb garden. Take your pick or grow them all. Come harvest time, your taste buds will be tickled you did.

About the Author: Sue Weaver is a freelance writer and herb lover.

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