

## **Herb Care**

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Herbs can take part in any landscaping scheme from the simplest planting at the kitchen doorstep to elaborate formal designs of great tradition. Their myriad of shapes, colors and textures offer many possibilities as ground covers and as border and background subjects. Integrated into the vegetable garden as insect repelling companion plants, they will be close at hand to season the harvest. Even the patio or deck can be adorned with herbs growing in attractive containers.

**Site Selection and Soil Preparation:** Any well drained sunny site will work for herbs. Generally herbs are not particular about soil type so long as it drains well. Poor soils (low fertility) tend to produce highly aromatic foliage, while richer soils produce less aromatic, but more abundant foliage. All soils will benefit from the addition of organic matter such as compost, manure or peatmoss, dug in to a depth of at least 8 inches. Remove all weeds and debris from the surface.

Although most herbs grow in full sun many will adapt well to partial sun sites as well. Some shade tolerant herbs such as chervil, curly parsley, mint, dill, cilantro, and sweet woodruff will thrive in partial shade.

**Planting the Garden:** The usual planting time is in the spring after the danger of frost is past. This is particularly true of the annual herbs such as basil and parsley. But many popular herbs are hardy perennials and can be planted anytime during the growing season, especially in the fall in mild California climate. Develop a layout for the herb garden, keeping in mind the spreading habits of some herbs and the vertical growth of others. Set out herbs in the garden where they are to be planted according to your plan and begin planting. Starting with the first plant, make a hole in the garden soil large enough to accommodate the rootball, plus a bit more in diameter. Add slow release organic fertilizer, then plant the herb, with the stem no deeper into the soil than the existing depth. Plant the plant so water drains away from the main stem. Water thoroughly, fertilizing lightly with a liquid fertilizer such as fish emulsion if you did not add a dry fertilizer.

**Watering:** Frequent, light spraying is not a good way to water. It is better to water, either with a sprinkler or with soaker hoses or drip, less frequently but thoroughly, so that the water penetrates deeply. Water should penetrate 8-12 inches to reach roots.

**Harvesting:** Annual herbs such as basil and parsley should be harvested frequently to maintain the bushiness of the plants and prevent them from flowering. Perennial culinary herbs have flowers that taste great, so be sure to eat the flowers as well as the foliage! Harvest leaves for drying by cutting small bunches, placing in rubber bands or lying flat on a screen and air drying in a dry shady location for 3 – 7 days, until dry.

### **Essential Plants for Your Kitchen Herb Garden**

**Parsley** – Biennial. Needs more water and more fertilizer. Very nutritious.

**Cilantro/Vietnamese Coriander** – Flavor used in many of the world's cuisines. Cilantro is a cool weather annual, grow in spring and fall. Vietnamese coriander is a hardy herbaceous perennial to grow in partial shade.

**Chives/Garlic Chives** – Herbaceous perennial. Great for edible flowers. Great for containers, indoors, sun or part shade, very adaptable. Harvest low to maintain good growth.

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**Rosemary** – (*Rosmarinus officinalis*). Sun/part shade. Evergreen. Spicy piny flavor, easy to grow. Important medicinal plant, delicious not just for entrees, but salads, soups, even desserts.

**Thyme** – English (*T. vulgaris*), Lemon (*T. x citriodorus*), Caraway (*T. herba-barona*). Sun/part shade perennial, tends to be short lived (2-4 years). Excellent plant for containers, windowsills. Average watering to fairly dry conditions.

**Sage** – (*Salvia officinalis*). Over 750 species, but only one is considered the best for culinary. Sun, needs dry conditions to thrive. Can be long lived perennial. Needs excellent drainage. Prune heavily in spring.

**Lemon Verbena** – (*Aloysia triphylla*) – Deciduous. Sun/part shade. 3-6 feet, excellent for teas, medicinal, desserts. Important plant for fragrance gardens. Prune to 1 ft tall in early spring.

**Oregano** (*Origanum vulgare*)/**Marjoram** (*Origanum majorana*). Sun. Herbaceous or evergreen. Oregano is a flavor, not a plant! Try the spicy Greek or Mexican oregano for spicy foods, Italian oregano for spaghetti and red sauces.

**Lemon Grass** – (*Cymbopogon citratus*) – An edible grass! Sun/part shade, needs excellent drainage and average water. Fleshy portions used for Asian cuisine, leafy portions for tea.

**Winter Savory** (*Satureja Montana*). Sun. Evergreen, growing to 8 inches. Leaves taste like spicy, complex pepper. Easy to grow in containers, as a short hedge, on the windowsill.

**Mexican tarragon** (*Tagetes lucida*) - Mexican tarragon is easy to grow, usually overwintering in our climate as an evergreen.

**Basil** (*Ocimum sp*) – Warm season annual. Loves full sun and plenty of water. Pinch frequently, and fertilize often to prevent flowering. The common basil is used for pesto, but there are many flavors, including lemon, thai, lime, purple, cinnamon, and spicy bush. Try them all in your summer cooking.

**Dill** (*Anethum graveolens*) – Plant in part sun to prolong life of the plant, otherwise it will go into bloom quickly. Prefers adequate water and fertilizer.

**French tarragon** (*Artemisia sativa var dracunculus*) – A favorite for fish, chicken and sauces, this homely herbaceous perennial needs sun and excellent drainage and very little water once established.