

# HOME & GARDEN

## Culinary herbs: fun without fuss

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Herbs are undemanding plants. They are not fussy about soil as long as it is well-drained, asking only to be planted where they can bask in the sun the better part of the day.

People grow them for many reasons. Some find the foliage makes an interesting contrast in the flower border. Some like to feel the connections with the past whether they envision Druid priestesses deep in the wood or bustling colonial nurses picking herbs for a healing "simple." Many people grow herbs because they are good cooks and like the advantage that a well-stocked herb garden gives their culinary enterprises.

### BETWEEN THE ROWS

I grow herbs for all those reasons and because they are so easy to grow that it is a real boost to my ego to have beautiful patches of chives and parsley, even if the potatoes or cabbage have not been significantly successful.

Of course, a culinary herb garden might be the most utilitarian herb garden, and a new gardener might find this a good place to start.

Basil grows quickly from seed planted directly in the garden when the weather has warmed up, but it can also be started indoors early in the season. Within four or five days the leaves push through the soil and in six weeks or so you will be able to start harvesting the basil leaves for use in tomato sauces or pesto which is such a summer favorite around my house.

Pesto is a combination of basil leaves, olive oil, garlic, parmesan cheese, tomato paste and maybe some pignola nuts, mixed together in a blender. It's wonderful on pasta just as it is, added to a regular spaghetti sauce or added to a bowl of light, fresh vegetable soup. Delicious.

There are many varieties of basil. Lettuce leaf is quite common and its large leaves are often seen in the spring at garden centers. Italian basil has slightly smaller leaves and is touted as being the proper variety for Italian cooking. Piccolo verde fino has small, pungent leaves, and I always plant some of this for my pesto. There is even a purple basil that is quite striking to look at with its deeply colored leaves. It can be used in cooking just as you would the green basil.

Chives can be started from seed early in the spring, but they will be so fine that they will not be much use in the kitchen even at the end of the summer. However, the second year they will be usable very early in the spring, and you'll have to divide your clumps ever after. Although they are very easy to grow from seed, if you are in a hurry, it is very easy to buy a small clump of chives. They are sold at nurseries and even at the supermarket. I clip this attractive onion-like plant all summer long for a thousand dishes, and I even snip it as I would for sprinkling on my baked potato and sour cream, and freeze it in small plastic bags so that all winter long I have that pungency at my beck and call.

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Anybody who likes pickles, herring, shrimp or Scandinavian or Ukranian cooking should grow dill. I love the scent so much. It always reminds me of the summer freshness of my youth in Vermont, and I cannot go into my garden to work without crushing a couple of leaves to release that fragrance.

Dill grows to a height of about 3 feet and matures in about six weeks. You might want to make a couple of plantings during June to have young dill all summer long. The feathery leaves can be used for flavoring while the plant is immature and later the round, flat seed heads can be used. Dill, weed or seed, has many uses in the kitchen. It is one of my favorites.

Although it is an annual, if you plant dill in an herb garden that is not tilled every year, you may find that it will self-grow. Many people are not even aware that parsley is an herb, it is so associated in their minds with garnishes. In fact, parsley adds good flavor to soups and many other dishes.

Curled parsley with its bright green leaves makes an attractive hedge in the garden as well as

a tasty garnish, but for flavor I prefer the flat or Italian leaved parsley. Both can be grown easily, but germination is slow, so be patient. It may take up to three weeks before there is any evidence of success, but once up it will do fine. Fortunately, it can be planted very early in the spring, and if you leave some in the garden in the fall, you may find it sprouting again the second spring.

A fifth and final herb that I might suggest for the cook's garden is summer savory. You can plant it in the herb garden where its airy foliage and small pinkish flowers will be very attractive, or you can interplant it in your bean patch. This will help to deter the Mexican bean beetle, and it will also remind you that a potful of beans cooked with a little summer savory is a surprising and delicious treat. It can be used in salads, and the French often use it as part of the "fines herbes" mixture that is such a standard part of so many dishes. "Fines herbes" mixtures include chervil, chives and perhaps thyme or tarragon as well as summer savory.

All of these herbs are easily grown, and I use them fresh out of the garden all summer and into the autumn. To extend their use into the dismal winter months when cooking becomes even more important — as a diversion and to cheer the heart (and stomach) — I dry these herbs.

Do not let herbs go to flower, or at least don't let all your herb plants go to flower. Pinch off the flower buds or, if the plant is sufficiently mature, harvest it when the buds are just appearing. I pick the plants and turn them upside down into a paper bag, tying a string around the stems and the top of the bag. I hang these bagged herbs upstairs in a very warm bedroom. In a couple of weeks I check them, and I am usually able to crumble the dry leaves into small glass bottles for use later. The drying time will depend on the weather and the humidity, but two weeks is usually sufficient. As I've mentioned, I freeze chives, but I do dry all the others.

Many herb plants can be purchased locally at The Kitchen Garden on Route 2 in Charlemon and the following are seed companies that offer a good selection of herbs: Burpee Co., Warminster, Pa. 18974; Epicure Seeds, Box 23568, Rochester, N.Y. 14692, and Parks Seed Co. Inc., S.C. Highway 254, North Greenwood, S.C. 29647.

## Energy program scheduled

This is a special invitation from the Franklin County Extension Service to an evening energy program featuring a movie from Canada; the exciting step-by-step retrofit saga of a drafty old Victorian house into an energy efficient, solarized showplace. A must-see film for owners of old houses, for contractors and realtors.

A demonstration on how to build your own solar hot-water system will also be offered. These heaters can be constructed at a cost of between \$300 and \$1,000 and will provide hot water from April through October.

The program will take place on June 4, Friday, at 7 p.m. in the Greenfield Community College lecture hall. There will be a \$5 charge for adults. For registration, call the Cooperative Extension Service at 774-2902.

# FIVE ACRE FARM

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YELLOW & GREEN	
SUMMER SQUASH . . . . . LB.	29¢
PEPPERS . . . . . LB.	49¢
D'ANJOU PEARS . . . . . LB.	49¢
WHITE	
JUMBO EGGS . . . . . DOZ.	89¢

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#### VEGETABLE PLANTS

Lettuce • Cauliflower  
Pepper • Tomato  
Broccoli • Cabbage  
and Many Others  
**\$1.25** a tray pak

