

Home/Garden

It's that time of year to bring your herbs indoors

In fall and winter the cook's herb gardening takes a definite practical turn. Gone are thoughts of colonial knot gardens where culinary, medicinal and fragrant or decorative herbs are arranged in complex and pleasing designs. Now that long sunny days have shortened, now that the dusk come early, chill and windy, now is the time to arrange for those aromatic herbs to come inside where they'll be handy to flavor savory stews and soups eaten by a crackling fire or glowing stove.

The Emperor Charlemagne said that herbs are "the friend of the physician and the pride of cooks." Pride does not go into eclipse during bad weather and fresh herbs can be grown on a windowsill or under lights.

Chives and parsley

For me chives and parsley are the two basic culinary herbs. Both can be dug up from the garden, if you have been growing them. If you bring herbs in from the garden, my advice is to be generous when you choose a flower pot. Plants growing in the garden have an extensive root system; only a part of those roots can be brought inside, but do put your plant in a good sized pot with an extra amount of good soil so the roots can continue to grow and expand again. The size of the pot will depend on the size of the clump you are bringing in, but when I have been stingy or careless about pot size, my herbs have not lasted very long.

Even if you do have chives or parsley to bring in, I'd recommend starting a pot of each from seed as well. Parsley has a long tap root that will not survive transplanting for too long but it should last long enough to be usable while the seeds are germinating and getting to a usable size. Chives germinate more quickly than parsley, but they grow so finely at first that you will be glad of the pot chives from the garden to use in the interim.

Pat Leuchtman



Between The Rows

Basil and dill

Basil is a very popular herb right now and it is easily grown indoors in a pot on a warm, sunny window or under lights. Like most plants, basil will grow more compactly under lights, partly because of the consistency of light intensity. Basil is very tender and will suffer if chilled. This is another reason why it's advantageous to grow it under lights, away from windows that will become cold at night.

Dill is another herb that I am particularly fond of that can be grown from seed indoors. It will never reach its outdoor height of three feet or set seed, but the feathery foliage, the dill weed, is very good for flavoring salads, salmon, cottage or cream cheese or soups.

Sage and rosemary

During the winter holidays, many festive birds are roasted, chickens, turkeys and ducks. For myself I cannot imagine roast bird without a stuffing flavored with sage. Fortunately sage can be grown from seed without any trouble if given a good sized pot and kept well watered.

Rosemary is beautiful, fragrant and useful in the kitchen. Buy a small plant from your local garden center or through mail order. Rosemary does not require as much light as other herbs; mine did very well in an east window until I acci-

dentally let it get too dry and it died.

That is the most difficult part of taking care of rosemary. It must be potted carefully with soil that drains well, but it must be watered often so that the soil is never completely dry.

Rosemary can also tolerate fairly cool temperatures. No matter what herbs you grow on your windowsill, or under your lights, they should be potted up carefully. Make sure each pot is well "crocked," that is prepared with shards of broken pots or pebbles at the bottom that will permit excess water to drain off.

Potting outdoor herbs

To further insure that your herbs will not suffer from root rot, choose a soil mixture that will drain well. Any commercial mix should do fine, but it won't hurt to add a handful of vermiculite.

Herbs growing outdoors usually don't need a rich soil, but when they're confined to small pots, it's a good idea to use dilute solutions of fertilizer periodically. I use fish emulsion mixed to half the recommended strength every couple of weeks.

Although potted herbs cannot be allowed to grow in heavy soil or stand in water because the roots will rot, they may suffer from dry, indoor air, especially in winter when the heating system is on. You can compensate for this by using a humidifier or cool mister near your plants, letting the pot stand on a tray filled with water and pebbles or misting them periodically.

Bugs are not usually a problem with herbs, but a biweekly shower is generally beneficial and will help stop aphids or spider mites before they become established. If they do gain a hold, you can wash the plants gently with a soapy water solution.

Let the sunny days of summer pass; let "herbs of every joyous kind" bloom at the cook's table.

