

Great Herbs

by Jacqueline Bruhn, Alameda County Master Gardener

Herbs are garden gems that love our temperate climate. Many herbs can be grown year round in the Bay Area. Some you can use as fragrant ground cover (rosemary, thyme and mounding chamomile) while others are companions to your cooking (oregano, basil, sage and dill). Others, such as lavender and sage, are thought of more as ornamental perennials than herbs. Herbs are easy to grow, rarely bothered by diseases and once established need little water.



Herbs are either annuals (last for one season) or perennials. Annual herbs can be planted in your garden wherever you have a little extra space. Annual basil lasts in my garden well into November and takes up very little space. Perennial herbs need to be planted in a place you can access easily and enjoy for many years to come. Many of the smaller herbs (parsley, oregano, basil) do well in containers.

Great uses of herbs include flavored oils and vinegars, infusing sugar or salt with dried herbs, combining fresh herbs into soft cheese – cream cheese and goat cheese work great for this. You can also make tea with herbs. The flowers of chamomile (*Matricaria recutita* not *Chamaemelum nobile* – the latter makes a lovely ground cover) make a wonderful tea. Lemon verbena and mint leaves also make great teas. For homemade tea all you need to do is pour hot water over fresh leaves and steep until you like the flavor.

While herbs can be started from seed it is often more economical to purchase plants at the nursery. Many herbs grow very slowly. You could be enjoying your nursery bought plants before your seedlings were ready to be outside. Both basil and dill break this rule as most are incredibly easy to grow from seed and grow, literally, like weeds.

Most herbs need sun but a few do well in partial shade. These include lemon balm, lemon thyme, some of the mints and French tarragon. Rosemary and lavender thrive in the hottest areas of your garden. I have planted chamomile in part shade and had enough flowers for a few cups of soothing tea. February and March are great months to start planning your herb garden. You can start basil from seed and be eating pesto before your tomatoes are even two feet tall. Herbs are some of the easiest and most rewarding plants to grow.

One good on-line resource for herb information is <http://www.wvu.edu/~agexten/hortcult/herbs/ne208hrb.htm>. There are many great books in the library on growing and using herbs. Remember to always be cautious whenever eating anything from your garden.

For further information go to <http://ucanr.org/index.cfm> and enter “herbs” in the search box. General gardening information can be obtained by going to <http://acmg.ucdavis.edu/> or calling the hot lines: 925-960-9420 or 510-639-1371.