



Mediterranean Herbs

Recap from the Mastering Mediterranean Herbs class. Why Mediterranean herbs? Because the Mediterranean-type ecosystems, with mild wet winters and warm and dry summers, occur in just five regions of the world – one being California. Also, be sure to check out the other Garden to Table Series handouts on the Ventura County Master Gardeners website for additional information.

What Herbs are Considered Mediterranean?

- Parsley: A vibrant herb used extensively in Mediterranean cooking.
- Basil: A must-grow herb with multiple varieties.
- Rosemary: A woody, pungent herb with a pine-like flavor.
- Thyme: An ancient herb with an earthy, peppery flavor.
- Sage: Featuring soft, aromatic grey-green leaves.
- Marjoram: A sweet herb related to oregano, with a milder flavor.
- Oregano: A staple in Mediterranean cuisine.
- Lavender: Intensely fragrant and floral – a classic Mediterranean herb.
- Tarragon – perennial with anise-like flavor, French variety more popular for cooking.
- Bay Leaf: A (shrub Bay Laurel) herb with a resinous scent used in various cuisine.

What Herbs are NOT Considered Mediterranean – but grow well in Ventura County?

- Anise: sweet fragrant aroma with a strong, licorice-like taste.
- Fennel: feathery stalks have a licorice taste, bulb does not.
- Borage: fast growing with scent and flavor of cucumbers.
- Mint: several varieties – cool, crisp effect in dishes.
- Chives (including garlic chives): delicate onion flavor in both the leaves and flowers.
- Dill: grassy herbal flavor, use leaves and seeds.
- Cilantro: tart slightly citrus taste related to parsley, carrots, and celery.
- Coriander: the dried seeds of cilantro with a citrus taste.

Where to Plant Herbs – Location Considerations:

- Consider potted kitchen herbs, comingled with vegetables or landscape, or a formal herb garden.
- In general, herbs do not need rich soil, however, they do require well-draining soil.
- Group plants in the garden based on water or soil needs and sun exposure requirements.
- Root-aggressive herbs like mints can be grown in pots.
- Most herbs require full sun, at least 6 hours. Indoor herbs do best in south facing window with 5 hours sun. However, some prefer (or tolerate) shade – cilantro, parsley, and basil.

When to Harvest:

- Pick in the morning, after dew evaporates, when oils are most intense.
- Harvest regularly to encourage continued production, and harvest leaves and stems before the plant blooms.
- Preserve seeds by cutting the seed heads before they turn tan, then place them in a paper bag and hang in a dry location. Collect the seeds after they've dried and fallen off.
- Prune herbs just above a leaf node to encourage lateral growth. This is important in spindly plants like basil.



Storing – General Tips:

- Do not wash herbs before storing - moisture can cause faster spoilage.
- Most fresh herbs can last 1-3 weeks with proper storage.
- Check herbs periodically and remove any wilted or discolored leaves.
- The key - mimic the herbs' natural environment – cool, slightly humid, and with minimal handling.

Drying Herbs:

Store dried herb leaves whole for best retention of flavor and aroma. Herbs stored in air-tight glass containers away from sun or heat, they will retain their flavor for 6-12 months. Methods to dry herbs:

- Air Drying: rinse and dry herbs, tie herbs in small bundles, hang upside down in a well-ventilated area out of direct sunlight. Drying time varies but are dry when the leaves crumble easily.
- Microwave Drying: place herbs on paper towel, microwave on low and stir between 30 second intervals.
- Oven Drying: remove leaves from stems, spread in single layer on a shallow pan, put oven on lowest setting with door open, bake until leaves crumble easily, stir occasionally.
- Dehydrator Drying: place stems on trays so they don't touch – dry for 1 to 4 hours, until leaves crumble and stems break.
- Frost Free Freezer Drying: spread (single layer) washed and well drained herbs on baking sheet, put in freezer until leaves are dry and brittle.

Using Herbs:

- **Fresh vs. Dried** – how much? - 3:1 Ratio (fresh to dry) - This is just a starting point, taste as you cook to find the right conversion rate.
 - Fresh Herbs – add near the end of the cooking process.
 - Dried Herbs - take longer to release their flavor. It's best to add them early in the cooking process.
- **Salad – usage tips:**
 - Fresh herbs are always preferred.
 - Use a mix of 2-3 herbs for added complexity and interest.
 - Finely chop herbs to distribute flavor evenly throughout the salad.
- **Main dishes or side dish ideas:**
 - Shrimp and fish – use tender herbs like parsley, cilantro, dill, chives, basil, or tarragon.
 - Hardy herbs go well with meat, beans, tofu and chicken: thyme, rosemary, sage, oregano.
 - Beans with Rosemary – add a spring of rosemary when cooking beans.
 - Herb Roasted vegetables – use a mix of hardy herbs.
 - Sautéed Green Beans (zucchini, spinach) – using either tender or hardy herbs
- **Tea and other uses:**
 - Tea – Lightly crush fresh herbs, then steep herbs in not quite boiling water for no more than five minutes. Add citrus, spices, or flowers to teas for added flavor.
 - Oils – Remove herbs after a few days. Try rosemary & lemon olive oil.
 - Butters – brown (heated) – sage, rosemary, or whipped - parsley, basil.
 - Crispy Leaves – from brown butter, add to potatoes, pasta, or risotto.
 - Sugar – massage herb/flowers into sugar to release the essential oils – use



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