

Kitchen Herb Gardens: All-Season Seasonings

By Celia Kea

Do you want to join the green scene, but suffer from the “got no” blues? What I mean to say is, do you want to do your part for the environment and maybe grow some of your own food, but you’ve got no time, no money, no place, no space, no know-how?

A kitchen herb garden might be just the thing for you. It’s great for kids, too. Worried about enough sun? My herb garden grows under a total canopy of oak trees.

No need for a yard. Mine grows in a half barrel, but one of those plastic tubs will do just as well. I have a Rubbermaid brand tub that is 15 years old. Cheaper ones will last at least a few seasons.

Fill your container about two thirds full with planting soil. My preference is a 70/30 mix of topsoil and sand. Some potting soils use perlite, a volcanic glass that expands when heated, to make the soil fluffy and help it retain water. You can also use compost to keep the soil fluffy and easy to work. Depending on the source of your soil mix materials, adjust the mixture to make sure it is light enough to drain well. I’ve even used soil from near my house; don’t worry, herbs are very forgiving.

If you use a half barrel, it will be porous and allow water to drain, but tubs will need drainage holes added. Drill holes on the sides at the bottom; this way, you can watch the water drain and clear the holes, if necessary. Tubs with handles work well if you need to occasionally move them. Your container herb garden will do well in any location that gets some direct sun.

Several kitchen herbs are in the mint family; for example, oregano, marjoram, thyme. Another good plant for your garden of seasoning is rosemary. The upright variety is best for this project. Chives and parsley round out the easy choices. These are all perennials, except parley, which reseeds easily. Once it’s planted, the only upkeep is watering and trimming.

When plants are young and newly planted, you might want to protect them from direct sun. For this purpose, I place a sturdy stick or metal rod in the middle of my container, extending a couple of feet above the plants. This will keep any covering from squishing them. A piece of old sheet will work, or a piece of purchased shade cloth, but I prefer a large clear plastic bag to create a greenhouse effect early in the season. This is also good for winter protection. These plants will survive being snowed on, but they don’t prefer it.

When using fresh herbs, flavors are not as concentrated as in dried plants. Any of the onion family—chives, green onions, shallots—are best fresh.

If you have children, this is a wonderful opportunity to let them explore smells and flavors. Pinching off a leaf and rubbing it between your fingers produces mouth-watering aromas. Let them pick one to be featured in that night’s dinner. The herbs mentioned here will blend with anything. And you might be inspiring a budding chef.

To dry these herbs, bundle them with rubber bands. As the bundles dry and shrink, the rubber bands will adjust. Hang herbs upside down, out of the sun, until dry. To remove the dried leaves, hold herb stems over a large piece of paper or cloth. Grab the blossom end with one hand and wrap the thumb and index finger of the other hand around the stem just below the blossom end. Slide your thumb and finger down the stem, stripping the leaves off as you go. Remove any undesirable bits, and store herbs in glass jars.

Once established, your edible herb garden will not only provide “spice” in your life, but will give you many ornamental blooms in shades of pink, purple, and white.

Celia Kea graduated from the UCCE Tuolumne County Master Gardener training class in 2009; she has a degree in botany.