

Herb Gardening for the Winter Chef by Dede Moreno

Fresh herbs can be the surprise addition to any meal. Store bought herbs can be expensive, often the price of the plant at the nursery. What's the solution? Grow your own!

Herbs can be grown indoors as well as outdoors, even in the winter. I grow sage, oregano, parsley and thyme all year round in my yard. Often, I pluck them while covered in snow to use in a soup, pasta or stew. An easier solution to going out in the cold is to grow your own indoors during the cold winter months. In the winter, planted herbs can add lovely greenery to your kitchen. All you need is sunlight, a well-ventilated area and some basic gardening knowledge to get you started.

The gardening skills consist of potting the plants in soil that will provide the proper nutrients and drain well. This is accomplished by placing one inch of gravel in the bottom of the container, then topping with two parts sterilized potting soil and adding one- part coarse sand or perlite. If your container is larger, increase accordingly.



Photo by Pauline Atkins, UCCE Master Gardener of El Dorado County

Perhaps you want to be creative and make the herb garden become a more decorative addition to your kitchen. Try using a tray or platter and place some small decorative rocks, stones or tumbled glass as a base for the pots. Make sure all the plants have the same care needs by reading the care instructions on each plant, or by doing some research on your own.

Find some old teacups or use terra cotta pots and paint them with the blackboard paint found readily in your local hardware store. Then write the name of the herb on the pot (or keep the instruction stickers that came with the plant).

Now ask yourself what you should plant. Think about what you like to cook, what you buy most often at the store, what is in your favorite dish in restaurants? You can make an Italian kitchen garden with basil, parsley, oregano, marjoram and sage. Try a French garden with tarragon, thyme, chives, lavender, sage and mint. You can throw in some garlic, as well. Be adventurous with an Asian garden and grow cilantro, lemon grass and ginger. Technically ginger is rhizome, not an herb, but it makes a wonderful houseplant. Just don't put it outdoors in the winter and be careful with dry climates. It may be best indoors year- round according to the Hawaii Cooperative Extension Service.

Thyme, mint, lavender and chives provide flowers for flower arrangements and can be used in baking or cooking. Make sure you pick the buds before they open, and the color is still vivid. This provides the best flavor and fragrance. Remember to keep it simple so you don't overwhelm yourself or your kitchen.

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UCCE Master Gardeners of Tuolumne and Calaveras Counties can answer home gardening questions. Call 209-533-5912 or go to: <http://ucanr.edu/survey/survey.cfm?surveynumber=7269> to fill out our easy-to-use problem questionnaire. Check out our website at: http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.edu/Master_Gardeners/ You can also find us on Facebook.