

Holiday Herbs

By Andrea Peck Master Gardener

Q. I'd like to use culinary herbs in my holiday cooking, what can I grow in the garden?

Mary M. Atascadero

As you find yourself smack dab in the middle of the holiday season you may be pondering the idea of growing herbs in your own garden. Certainly fresh herbs would be nice as you tinker with recipes and sort through 5-year-old bottles of semi-green seasonings. Growing your own herbs is an easy extension of the gardening practice you currently indulge in and once you begin your own collection of herbs, you'll likely find yourself eager to experiment. I must admit that having a little herbary in the yard makes for shorter shopping lists, fresher fare, and less money spent at the register. The exciting news is that herbs are easy to grow and make for attractive additions to the garden.

Herbs fall into three basic categories: annual, perennial and biennial. Annual herbs include anise, basil, coriander and dill. Perennial herbs include chives, fennel, lovage, marjoram, mint, rosemary, lemon verbena, lemon grass and thyme. Examples of biennial herbs are caraway, parsley and sage. Depending on your climate, annuals may sometimes take on a more perennial growth habit.

When planting herbs, it is important to select a good site, preferably one that is close to the kitchen. Place plants in a sunny spot that drains well. Herbs prefer loamy soil with a pH around 6.0 to 7.0. Don't over fertilize herbs as this tends to create excess growth and deplete flavor. In areas where freezing is common, potting plants in containers can be a solution. Many herbs grow happily in containers provided the soil drains well.

A designated herb bed may be your first inclination, but when you see how pretty most herbs are, you may opt to plant them along borders in and among other edibles and ornamentals with similar sun and water needs.

During the holiday season, herbs have many uses beyond cooking. Create oil infusions and savory salts or fragrant sugars with herbs such as rosemary and lavender. Build a pungent herb wreath or simply trim your rosemary bush into the shape of a Christmas tree and decorate away.