



GROWING HERBS FOR THE KITCHEN

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Anyone with a sunny garden spot can grow herbs for kitchen use. The essentials for growing a dozen commonly used herbs are presented below. Herbs do well in garden soil, raised beds and in containers. They make excellent border plants. All they need is sunshine, good drainage and consistent watering. Most herbs need little fertilizer although a light dose of a complete fertilizer should be given each spring. Plants growing in containers generally need more frequent applications of fertilizer since watering leaches some fertilizer away.

Insect pests like aphids and spittlebugs attack herbs in the springtime. These can usually be discouraged using a strong blast of water from the hose a couple of times a week during the spring. If any pesticide is used, be sure to thoroughly wash all plant parts at the time you harvest. Weeds should be controlled around young herb plants.

Diseases commonly attack herbs grown in the ground, causing root and crown decay. Avoid these fungus diseases by planting on a slight mound or plant in a raised bed. Keep soil water conditions on the 'dry side', unless indicated. Remember to adjust watering schedules to match seasonal needs, and apply very little water to perennial plants late in the fall. Late fall watering favors crown rot diseases. Leaf and branch diseases are common to hedged plants, especially during spring rainfall periods. Keep diseased parts trimmed out and removed from the garden area. It's OK to compost above ground diseased parts.

Crop rotation is essential to good garden soil health. Plant herbs where flowers or vegetables were previously planted. Crop rotation helps prevent the build-up of soil diseases and insects that favor one plant family. Plants of the same family should not be planted in the same spot for more than two consecutive years. Example families include Labiatae (mint), Compositae (sunflower), Umbelliferae (carrot), Leguminosae (pea), Cucurbitaceae (melon) and Cruciferae (mustard). It is a good idea to include a summer rest period in your crop rotation plan. During a summer rest period you can capture the sun's energy with a clear plastic tarp and 'solarize' that part of the garden. When done properly, solarizing reduces weeds and pest organisms in the soil. Before solarizing, be sure to add compost and adjust soil nutrient levels.

The guidelines below will help you successfully produce herbs for home use. Properly timed trimming and harvesting is also essential for herb garden success. See the companion [Napa Garden Tips: 'Harvesting Herbs'](#) for proper Guidelines.

Lavender (*Lavendula* species) Labiatae

Dozens of lavender types are available, each with its own oil content and growing sensitivities. Of the many species and hybrids, most commonly planted are *L. angustifolia* (French or English lavender) and *L. latifolia* (Spanish or Portuguese lavender). Lavenders require full sun at least 7 hours per day, and need excellent drainage. Sensitive to overwatering, they often get stem

and leaf diseases in our North Coast climate. Give infrequent watering. Lightly fertilize. Planting distance varies with species and cultivar but expect to replace some plants after 3 to 5 years.

Rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*) Labiatae

Over a dozen types of rosemary are planted in gardens, as upright shrubs or as prostrate groundcovers. Generally with blue flowers, white and pink flowered cultivars can be found. Rosemary, like roses, like deep soil with good drainage. Like most herbs, rosemary is prone to root rot in heavy soil. It does best along the top of a retaining wall, or when planted on a mound. Needs full sun all day. Gets spittlebugs, but bees and hummingbirds love it. After establishment, starve it for water and fertilizer. Likes regular, light trimming. Plants last more than a decade.

Mint (*Mentha species*) Labiatae

Every country has its favorite mint. Species and cultivars are available with a wide range of aromas and flavors. Some collections feature over one hundred selections. Mints vary from tiny groundcover types to large upright types – from mild to robust aromas. Most common are Spearmint (*M. spicata* aka *M. viridis*) and peppermint (*M. X piperita*). Propagation is by cuttings to be true to type. Mints like water, partial shade and some nitrogen fertilizer. Some mints, like peppermint, will tolerate but produce smaller leaves when grown in full sun. Watch for aphids and spittlebugs. Mints ‘creep’ by rooting untrimmed branches and by producing rhizomes, so must be regularly trimmed back.

Basil (*Ocimum species*) Lamiaceae

Basils are easy-to-grow summer annuals. They love rich soil in the hot sun. They like to be mulched with old compost after the ground has warmed. Basil is frost-killed. Grow basil in the garden like peppers. A wide range of basil types is available, primarily Lemon basil (*O. americanum*) and Italian basil (*O. Basilicum*) in many cultivars. Basils need lots of hot sunshine. Encourage bushing by frequent trimming and flower removal. Keep weeds away.

English Thyme (*Thymus species*) Labiatae

Thymes are short plants that like strong sun and rocky spots. Most are small upright woody plants, but *T. praecox* subsp. *arcticus* is a creeping type. Because of our wet climate, most thyme selections in our area last only a season or two in the garden. They succumb to root rot, leaf blights and spider mites. Bees love thyme, so harvest before bloom starts.

Tarragon (*Artemisia dracunculus*) Compositae

Most recipes call for French tarragon (*A. dracunculus* var. *sativa*). It is highly scented than is the commonly seeded Russian tarragon (*A. dracunculus*). Also, the ‘mint marigold’ from Mexico (*Tagetes lucida*) is sometimes used as a substitute. Tarragon takes work to be successful in the garden. Keep it productive by removing flowers and be sure not to overwater. The plants need invigorating, so divide them every other year. In cold areas, consider layering a branch in the summer to make a pot plant to keep indoors in bright light during the winter.

Oregano (*Origanum vulgare*) Labiatae

Variable from seed, oregano can be one of many plants with similar flavor and aroma. In Europe, cooks generally use Greek oregano *Origanum vulgare* subsp. *hirtum* also known as *O. vulgare* ‘Viride’. (Sometimes sold as *O. heracleoticum* or *O. hirtum*). Grown throughout Europe, Asia and the New World, oregano has frequently escaped from gardens and become naturalized. Thus, many selections are also available. Greek oregano performs best in cool climates. Mexican or Puerto Rican oregano (*Lippia graveolens*) is different altogether, being adapted to hotter climates. Most oreganos grow from 1 to 3 feet tall. They all like full sun and well-drained soil for consistent growth. Propagate cuttings or root divisions.

Sage (*Salvia species*) Labiatae

Sage is native to the Northern Mediterranean coast and prefers slightly alkaline soils. Several species are grown for kitchen use, primarily *S. officinalis* cultivars, and variegated and dwarf forms are common. Mexican sage is *S. leucantha*. These rugged 1 to 3 foot tall plants prefer full sun and dry foliage. They require little water after establishment. Easily propagated from cuttings and by layering. The flowers attract bees, butterflies and hummingbirds. Dried leaves have stronger flavor.

Coriander (*Coriandrum sativum*) Umbelliferae

Known as “cilantro” in Mexico, also Chinese or Mexican parsley, coriander is grown and used worldwide. Grown from seed, coriander produces a flower when exposed to hot weather. Locally it is considered a cool season plant. Plant seed spaced at two inches in rows a foot apart. Grow it like corn, and use as a background plant. Gets leaf diseases.

Parsley (*Petroselinum crispum*) Umbelliferae

Parsley grows in partial shade, even indoors making it useful as a kitchen window container plant. Grown as an annual from seed planted after frost is past. Parsley doesn't transplant easily. Seed takes about a month to germinate. Thin plants to 6 inches apart and keep weeded. Insects like to eat parsley, and young plants get root rot. Start more seed when leaves get tough.

Chives (*Allium schoenoprasum*) Liliaceae

Chives are perennials adapted to Coastal California weather conditions. They grow equally well in containers and in the garden. They like cool, moist conditions and are hardy in cold weather. Plant from seeds or a divided older clump. Allow 6 inches between plants. Chives go dormant in the fall and will regrow the following spring. They need frequent watering and fertilizing in the spring and summer months.

Lemon Balm (*Melissa officinalis*) Labiatae

An herbaceous plant, lemon balm has a useful place in the kitchen as well as in the garden. It is a favorite of bees and in fact the Greek word for honeybee is Melissa. Place seed on soil surface, keep surface moist for germination. Prefers full sun, will tolerate some shade. Grows slowly, with stronger growth the second year to 2 feet. May get mildew.

Additional Reading:

Specialty and Minor Crops, UC ANR Publication #3346, 1998.

Rodale's Illustrated Encyclopedia of Herbs, C. Kowalchik and W.H. Hylton, Eds, Rodale Press, Emmaus, Pennsylvania, 1987.

Growing Herbs for Seasoning Food, UC ANR leaflet 2639, 1978.

Landscaping with Herbs, James Adams, Timber Press, 1987.

Soil Solarization, a Nonpesticidal Method for Controlling Diseases, Nematodes and Weeds, UC ANR Publication #21377, 1997.