



THE MULTI-PURPOSE HERB GARDEN

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Butterfly on
Oregano

What are edible, low maintenance, beautiful, and attractive to pollinators in your garden? Herbs!

One of the primary uses of herbs is to flavor food. If you grow your own, you know the convenience of stepping outside to harvest fresh herbs when you need them. There is a selection of varieties available. See Table 1 for some common herbs. A couple of my favorites are 'hot and spicy' oregano for tomato-based sauces and 'lemon' thyme for salmon. Herbs can also be harvested and dried for later use. For more information on harvesting, drying and storing herbs, visit <http://extension.illinois.edu/herbs/tips.cfm>.

There are annual, perennial, and even shrubs that are used as herbs. Every plant requires care and certain growing conditions to perform optimally. In general, herbs are easy to grow. Most will thrive in well drained soil and 6-8 hours of sun per day. A soil test is recommended to determine type and quantity of amendment to add to your soil. A light application of fertilizer may be enough for the entire growing season. Adding mulch to the top of the soil will help conserve moisture, keep roots cool, and minimize weeds.

After cultural conditions are met, it is easy to maintain the growth of herbs. If you tend to snip your herbs as you use them, you are pruning them. New growth will occur where the pruning cut was made. Deadheading spent flowers is another form of pruning that will encourage more growth and flowering. Harvesting herbs to dry requires pruning a majority of the plant. How much and when to prune for a large harvest depends on the type of herb plant. Annuals may be harvested by cutting the whole plant to the ground. Perennials may be reduced by half, but be cautious of pruning during high temperatures and drought. Avoid pruning in fall, which may stimulate new growth that will be injured with the coming cold temperatures. Shrubs such as rosemary and bay laurel are sensitive to drastic pruning. Pruning to bare wood of these plants may delay growth or cause decline.

Many herbs spread by rhizomes and may be propagated by dividing the plants. To propagate these, carefully dig up the plant during winter dormancy, cut it in half and replant. Some will spread aggressively, such as mint, and it would be wise to place these in their own planter. Herbs grown in a container will need more care. Irrigation and nutrients may be needed more frequently than for plants grown in the ground.

Arranging herbs with complementary or contrasting flowers and foliage in a container will provide a beautiful focal point in the garden and can be kept within easy reach of the kitchen for harvesting.

The less aggressive spreading herbs can be used beneficially in the garden as a ground cover. You may add them to planting beds to fill in gaps between other plants. Their foliage will shade the soil and crowd out potential weeds. Remember to plant herbs with the same cultural requirements as existing plants. As a ground cover, herbs can add beauty to your garden with their various foliage colors, fragrance, and flowers.

Table 1: Common Herbs

| Annual | Perennial | Shrub |
|----------|---------------|------------|
| Basil | Cone Flower | Bay Laurel |
| Chives | Fennel | Lavender |
| Cilantro | Lemon Verbena | Rosemary |
| Dill | Mint | Sage |
| Marjoram | Oregano | |
| Parsley | Thyme | |

Some herb flowers are attractive to beneficial insects. When harvesting herbs for cooking, remember to leave some stems to develop flowers for the pollinators. The flowers are a source of pollen and nectar. Bees are attracted to flowers of mint, basil, lavender, oregano, and thyme. Butterflies will visit flowers of sage, oregano, and sweet marjoram for nectar. Dill and parsley are butterfly larval host plants.

Herbs offer beauty for the garden with minimal care and provide flavorful additions to a meal without the need to travel to the grocery store. These versatile plants even attract beneficial insects to the garden. These could be the perfect plants!

References

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