

LIGHT REQUIREMENTS

Most herbs require 6 – 8 hours of sun daily. If grown more in the shade, the leaves grow bigger as they are seeking more sun. This can be an advantage in growing some herbs.

Sun lovers in general are:

Oregano, parsley, agretti (Monk's beard), Mexican tarragon, thyme, sage, mints, lemon balm, savories (both winter and summer)

The following can be grown in **partial shade** with wonderful results:

Basil, Korean mint, lemon balm, parsley

HERBS IN CONTAINERS

Most herbs grow well in containers. Mints especially should be contained as they are voracious growers and can be quite invasive.

You would want to group herbs together in pots that require similar amounts of water. Some examples would be sage, rosemary, thyme, parsley, etc.

Use soil based potting mediums, not peat as soil holds moisture much better. Also remember that different materials used to make pots will be a factor in how much you will have to water. Clay pots that aren't glazed obviously allow the water to evaporate from the soil fast than pots that are glazed.

Advantages to growing in pots:

You can control growing conditions, ie: temperature and soil moisture.

Pots are gorgeous and nothing is exempt from having herbs or flowers put in it! I have used old boots, grills, buckets, wheelbarrows, etc. Be creative!

Ease in pruning.

Easy access.

Manageable grown habits.

Pest control.

If growing indoors, a south or west window provides the best light.

PESTS

Few insects or diseases attack herbs. In some localities, rusts infect mints. In hot, dry weather, spider mites damage some herbs.

Aphids attack anise, caraway, dill and fennel. Grasshoppers and certain caterpillars attack herbs when conditions are right. Control is usually not necessary until you notice a problem.

MOISTURE REQUIREMENTS

Some herbs love moist soil such as mint and lovage. Mediterranean herbs require less water and some say that harsher conditions enable the plant to produce more oils thus giving the leaves a stronger, more intense flavor.

BRINGING HERBS TO THE TABLE

Once you have a fresh supply of herbs in the kitchen, the opportunities are truly endless. Here are a few simple ideas:

Pair basil leaves with sun-warmed tomato slices for an irresistible sandwich or salad.

Drop whole mint leaves into a tall glass of iced tea.

To create herbal butters, mince herbs and mix into softened butter.

Create Fines Herbs by mixing 1 Tbsp. each of chervil, parsley, chives and tarragon. Sprinkle the mixture over eggs or meats before serving.

Add freshly minced herbs to vegetable or fruit salads.

Puree fresh herbs with mayonnaise to produce innovative sandwiches.

CUTTING, DIVISION AND LAYERING

Some herbs don't propagate by seed. They multiply by cuttings, division and layering.

Layering is suitable for many perennials with flexible branches such as mint. Division works well for tarragon, chives and mint as well. You can propagate lavender, lemon balm sage and rosemary by cuttings (as well as mint). The best time to take cuttings of herbs is during late spring and summer.

Cuttings: Always take cuttings from well established plants. Those taken in the fall take longer to root.

Healthy tip growth makes the best cuttings. Old woody stems are less desirable. Cut just below a node to form a cutting that is 3 to 5 inches long. Most herbs should root in two to four weeks. After rooting, overwinter them indoors in pots in a sunny window or coldframe. Plant them outdoors in a sunny location in the spring.

Division: Division is useful for multiplying healthy, established plants that may be two to four years old. Tarragon and mints do well with division. Most sources tell you to divide in early spring before growth occurs, but I've had luck in the summer as well. Dig up the old plant and cut or pull it apart into sections. Replant the sections and keep them moist until the new plants are established.

Layering: is the simplest and most reliable method to increase perennial herbs such as thyme, lemon balm, winter savory, sage and rosemary. The basic principle is to produce roots on a stem while it is still attached to the parent plant. After you root the stem, detach the new plant from the parent. Select a healthy branch that is growing close to the ground and that is flexible enough to bend down to the soil. While holding the branch close to the soil, bend the top 6 to 10 inches of the stem into a vertical position. It may be helpful to scrape the bark on the underside of the branch at the bend. Bury the bent portion a few inches deep (3 to 6) and anchor it with a wire loop. Insert a small stake to hold the top upright. Water thoroughly.

Layer anytime between spring and late summer. After root is established, plant it in the desired location.

WINTER PROTECTION

Many herbs suffer winter damage in our climate, so some winter protection for perennial herbs is helpful. Many herbs have shallow roots that heave out during spring thawing and freezing of soil. A loose mulch spread over the roots about 4 inches deep can provide adequate protection. Evergreen boughs, straw or leaves are good materials. Mulch after the ground is frozen in early winter. Don't remove mulch (if you want to remove it) until you see new growth in the spring. If it compacts during the winter, fluff it up a bit early spring before new growth occurs.

HARVESTING HERBS (for drying or storage)

Depending on the herb, harvesting may include one or more parts of the plant. In most cases you harvest the leaves, but in some cases you pick flowers, seeds or roots. Handle blossoms the same as you would handle the leaves. Often, you harvest blossoms with the leaves and mix them together. Dried herbs lose quality in two to three years. Discard them if you haven't used them in that time.

You want to harvest the leaves when they have the optimum amount of essential oils. The oils are what give the leaves their special flavor or scent. Ideally you should cut herbs soon after the dew has evaporated from the leaves in the morning.

In most cases, cut stems for harvest when the flower buds are just beginning to open. Mints

have the most oil in the leaves when the spikes are in full bloom, however.

When gathering large amounts, use an open weave basket or containers that allow air circulation. Don't use plastic bags which can heat up and cause rapid deterioration of herbs. You can cut back a perennial herb to about half its height and can cut down an annual to a few inches.

Wash the plants in cool water immediately after harvesting and spread them on towels. Pat them gently with a towel until dry. A dark, well-ventilated room when temps run between 70-90 degrees is an excellent room for drying. You can use frames covered in cheesecloth or other netting, or metal window screens with cheesecloth laid on top.

For some herbs you strip the leaves from the stems before drying. Herbs in this group will include basil, lemon balm, lovage, mint, sage, lemon verbena and tarragon. Spread these leaves in single layers for quickest drying.

Herbs with smaller leaves can be dried on the stems. These herbs include thyme, summer and winter savory, rosemary, oregano and marjoram. Strip the leaves after drying is complete.

Herb leaves should take about 3 – 4 days to dry under the proper conditions.

Harvesting Roots: Angelica and lovage produce usable roots. Dig these roots in the late fall or early spring. Wash them thoroughly after digging. Slice or split the large roots. Place the pieces in thin layers on screens and turn the slices several times a week. After they are partially dry, finish them in an oven at low heat before placing them in an airtight container for storage. It may take roots 6 – 8 weeks to dry completely. The root piece should snap when you bend it when dry.

GROWING HERBS INDOORS

You can grow herbs indoors, but they will be less productive than those grown outside. Select a south or west window. During winter they need as much light as you can give them. If a bright location is unavailable, supplement light with grow lights or fluorescent lighting.

Good drainage is important. Never leave herbs sitting in a saucer of water. Water well, so a little water runs through the pot but does not accumulate. Allow moderate drying, but not wilting between watering.

Remedies

One of the easiest and best ways to extract the medicinal properties of the herbs is to make a tisane, or herb tea, which can be drunk just like ordinary tea, and can provide a helpful supplement to the daily diet. To obtain the best flavor I always recommend using fresh herbs, but remember that they are less concentrated than dried herbs, as they still contain all their moisture. One of my favorite teas is lemon verbena, which has a lovely flavor and aroma, and is refreshing served hot or cold either on a summer's day, or last thing at night to help me get a good night's sleep.

How to make a herbal tea or tisane

Generally you need either five fresh leaves or a sprig, 5cm (2 in) in length or 2 tsp of dried herb or 1 tsp of seed per cup of boiled water. Place them on a clean piece of kitchen towel, lightly crush, and then add to a cup or teapot. Pour over the boiled water that has been cooled to just below boiling and cover.

Covering is especially important as this stops the essential oils, which are medicinally beneficial, evaporating off in the steam. Leave to brew for five minutes. Strain if necessary into a cup. Herb teas rarely require milk, but may be sweetened with honey to taste.

Herb teas to try:

Chamomile tisane, made from the flowers is lovely last thing at night to aid sleep.

Dill seed tisane is useful for calming griping pains.

Peppermint leaf tisane made drunk after a meal aids digestion.

Lemon balm tisane made from the leaves is a mild anti-depressant and also relieves tiredness, headaches and reputedly restores the memory.