



Creating an Herb Garden

...plus tips on propagating, harvesting and using your home-grown herbs

An herb is a plant that has a place in nearly every garden. While you can create a traditional “knot” or “wheel” design, herbs can be successfully incorporated into the landscape with other plants. Use them as fillers, in a rock garden, as ground covers, as low hedges or edgings, or grown them in containers—outdoors or inside.

Planting and Care

Care for your herb garden much the same way as your vegetable or flower garden. Most herbs do best in sunny location. The herbs' essential oils, which produce flavor and fragrance, are produced in the greatest quantities when the herb plants receive 6-8 hours of sun per day. However, some herbs, particularly in the mint family, seem to do quite well in bright partial shade.

Their requirements also include adequate moisture and relatively fertile soil, so avoid locations where they will be competing with tree roots. Any good garden loam will be satisfactory. A soil pH of neutral to slightly alkaline is best. Good drainage is essential, and poorly drained soils should be improved with the addition of sand and organic material. Once established, most herbs prefer dry soil. You'll want to water them sparingly. Only a few herbs, such as mint, angelica and lovage, do best in moist soil.

Fertilization is not necessary except for heavily harvested herbs—basil, chives and parsley. Apply a slow-release fertilizer at the rate of 2 pounds per 100 square feet. Water as necessary during dry periods—about 1 inch of water per week. Too much water and/or fertilizer will produce lush foliage, but not enough of the essential oils (flavor and fragrance).

Mulching will help conserve soil moisture and also reduces weed growth. Mint herbs prefer moist soil so they will require more frequent watering.

Propagating

Both annual and biennial herbs can be established by planting the seed directly in the garden, or by starting seeds indoors for later transplanting. You can save seed produced by the herb plants for next year's crop, or purchase seed from your local garden center or seed catalog.

To save your own seed, harvest the entire seed head after it has dried on the plant. The seeds should then be allowed to dry in a protected location that is cool and dry. After the seeds are thoroughly dry, thresh the seed from the seed heads and discard the trash. Store in labeled jars in a dark, cool, dry location. Remember that some herb seeds, such as dill, anise, caraway or coriander can be used for flavoring your cooking.

Perennial herbs can be propagated by cuttings or by division. Divide plants every 3 to 4 years in the early spring. The plants should be dug up and cut into several sections. You can also cut 4 to 6 inch sections of the stem and root them by placing the cuttings in moist sand in a shady area. In 4 to 8 weeks, roots should form on these cuttings. Herbs such as sage, winter savory and thyme can be propagated by cuttings. Chives, lovage and tarragon can be propagated by division of the roots or crowns.

Harvesting

The leaves of many herbs such as parsley and chives can be harvested for fresh seasonings. On these plants, gradually remove some of the leaves as you need them. Don't remove all the foliage at one time. These plants will produce over a long period of time if they are well cared for.

On rosemary and thyme, clip the tops when the plants are in full bloom. Usually, leaves and flowers are harvested together. Basil, fennel, mint, sage, summer savory, sweet marjoram, tarragon and winter savory are harvested just before the plant starts to bloom.

Continued on Back

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Chervil and parsley leaves can be cut and dried anytime. Lovage leaves should be harvested early, during the first flush of growth.

Preserving

Freezing – Delicate annuals such as dill, basil and chervil have volatile essential oils that won't survive drying. To keep their flavor alive, freeze them instead. For large-leafed herbs like basil, pick the leaves off the stalks and pack around a dozen leaves in a small plastic freezer bag. You can also freeze springs of small-leafed herbs such as dill and tarragon. Parsley and chives can be frozen, too, though both parsley and chives will live in the garden through winter in many parts of Texas. Use frozen herbs in the same proportion as you would fresh.

Drying – Drying is effective only with those herbs whose oils do not readily vaporize, such as oregano, mint, sage and a few others. Though drying in bunches is the traditional method, it is not the best. Herbs will dry more evenly if you place them in a single layer on a muslin-covered ventilated rack in a dry, airy room. Allow 2 to 4 days to dry completely. To dry seeds, put them in a dry place, cover with paper and leave them 10 to 14 days. When herbs are dry, remove the leaves and store away from light in tightly covered containers. Home-dried herbs have more flavor than ones commercially prepared and packaged, but even so, they are best if used within 6 months. Overall, dried herbs have more flavor intensity than fresh. In a recipe, use 1/2 or 1/3 the amount of fresh herbs.

Commonly Used, Adapted Herbs for South Texas

Basil. One of the easiest to grow, including from seed. In addition to standard green forms, there are purple-leafed basil and lemon-scented basil. Quite tender, expect to lose it at the first frost.

Chives. Smallest member of the onion family. Easily grown from seeds or transplants. Use as you would onions for flavoring.

Coriander. Also known as *Cilantro* or *Chinese Parsley*. Use only the young leaves. Easily grown from seed, which you should sow every few weeks to have a steady supply of young leaves. Does best in cooler weather.

Dill. One of the easiest herbs to grow from seed. Will easily become a weed if the seed heads are allowed to dry on the plant. Large, green caterpillars that turn into swallowtail butterflies love to eat dill, so plant enough for both you and them.

Lemon Balm. A member of the mint family than can be started from seeds, cutting or roots. Once established it will spread and self-sow, so grow this plant in a confined bed or in containers. Leaves have strong lemon odor.

Marjoram. Woody cousin of Oregano with a more delicate, sweeter flavor. Several varieties and forms. Best grown from transplants or root cuttings.

Mints. Many varieties, and one of the hardiest and easiest herbs to grow. Grown from cuttings, roots or transplants. Seeds can be difficult. Most of the varieties are tough, hardy plants for South Texas. All mints appreciate moisture and do best in afternoon shade.

Oregano. Most common 2 in this area are *Origanum vulgare*, a low-spreading Oregano used in Italian and Greek cooking. Other is the bush shrub we call Mexican Oregano (*Lippia graveolens*, or *Lippia palmeri*). Use dried leaves for best results.

Parsley. Comes in 2 forms: flat-leaf, or Italian parsley, and curled, or French parsley. Available as seeds or transplants. Seed is slow to germinate. A biennial, it produces leaves the first year and flowers the next.

Rosemary. Hearty, tough plant that thrives in our hot, dry climate. Also used as a landscape plant and widely available as a transplant at nurseries and garden centers. Many varieties and forms.

Sage. Doubles as a durable landscape plant. Very drought resistant; can be killed by over-watering. Best started from transplants or cuttings. Many varieties available. Dried leaves will keep their flavor for years.

Thyme. More than 400 species available. Can be used in beds, rock gardens and as landscape accents. Locally available varieties include Common, Woolly, "Mother-of-Thyme", Lemon, English, Silver and Golden.

The source for this **GVST Gardening Guide** is **Dr. Jerry Parsons**, Professor and Extension Horticulturist, Texas Cooperative Extension Service. For more information on growing and using herbs, visit these websites: www.papagenos.com, www.PlantAnswers.com, or <http://www.aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu>.