




Senior Organic
GARDENERS



Culinary Herbs for Food Preparation

By Rob Danforth



Herbs are easy to grow and have a lot of uses in a garden. They provide flavor enhancers (e.g. thyme in your scrambled eggs; rosemary or mint on your lamb), offer great fragrances alone or in a potpourri (e.g. lavender, Thai basil), some will hide the fragrance of plants you wish to protect from marauding insects (e.g. lemon balm, mint), some will repel certain insects (e.g. chives, garlic chives), some, when flowering, will attract helpful insects (e.g. borage, dill); some encourage the growth of certain plants (e.g. brassicas + sage; tomato + Genovese basil), and a great many offer health benefits (e.g. parsley, chamomile). This article will focus on culinary herbs for the kitchen.

If you have very limited space (e.g. balcony rail or a few small containers) you might consider some of your favorite herbs – you can even grow them indoors in a sunny window or under grow lights, however, herbs that have been basking in the sun **always** taste better. Naturally we like herbs first for their taste; their other uses are a bonus.

If you can keep them close to your kitchen, you can nip out and snip a bit to add to food preparation. The plant will grow on and you do not have the hassle of herbs dying in the fridge before you can use them. Remember that bunch of cilantro or mint you could not finish in time? Green-black, slimy, and a smell to kick your head back? Growing your own lets you take only what you need when you need it. We keep two, 24-inch window boxes in cradles a few short steps from the kitchen: sage, rosemary, thyme, chives, cilantro, and an entirely separate pot for mint. Parsley in a box bed or large pot can supply your needs all summer – add it to green leaf salads or make a tabbouleh salad (parsley, mint, tomatoes, onion, salt, pepper, olive oil, and lemon juice – plus bulger wheat. **Tip:** we always substitute couscous which we have on hand for other needs).

At the end of the season you have choices: put whole sprigs in a plastic bag and freeze them until needed – and again take out only what you need at the time; make butter logs with added herbs and freeze them – chip off a measured amount when needed; place herbs in water or olive oil in ice cube

Popular Herbs:

- **Basil** + tomatoes
- **Chives** + sour cream
- **Cilantro** + salsa
- **Dill** + yoghurt + mayonnaise + lemon
- **French Tarragon** + fish
- **Garlic** + meats/salads
- **Mint** + salads or lamb
- **Parsley** + salad greens
- **Rosemary** + lamb or potatoes
- **Sage** + Chicken
- **Thyme** + eggs
- **Stevia** (sugar x3)



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trays and freeze them – add some cubes to soups or sauces; or dry herbs in a warm oven (150°F) or hang herb bundles to dry in a warm area away from moisture. We have done all of these and the most convenient is to freeze the sprigs in plastic bags.

Some people like to flavor oil or vinegar with herbs. It is a little more complicated and there is a best before date for the finished product. We have looked into this and have decided not to do it; however, if you look on-line or visit the library or a bookstore, you can find a number of recipes and tips. Do be sure to remove all the plant material and strain the liquid after the specified brewing time. The flavor is in the oils the plants produce – decay is in the plant material!

Growing tips

Herbs have different water and fertilizer needs. Mediterranean herbs (e.g., sage, rosemary, thyme) need well drained containers, but cycles of wet and dry to intensify the oils and thus the flavors. Other herbs need a constantly moist soil (e.g., basil; cilantro) and they must not dry out. In addition, basil prefers warm temperatures and a moderate sun while cilantro prefers cool temperatures and a mild or indirect sun. Cilantro will bolt in the hot sun and the flavor will become bitter. We hide it behind other plants like parsley. Tip: when the cilantro leaf looks like the palm of your hand with fingers together, the taste is good; when the leaf looks fern-like (e.g. your palm with fingers spread apart), the plant is bolting and the leaves will be bitter or at least very strong and unpleasant tasting for many.

Selection

Selecting herbs to buy from nursery stock: lightly rub the leaves & select the plant(s) with strongest scent – not all the plants on offer are the same quality; if possible, select hardy varieties for our 5a zone (e.g., arugula, oregano, sage, thyme).

Annuals

Annuals need to be replaced with new plants each year]: e.g., Basil, Borage, Chervil, Cilantro/Coriander, Dill, Marjoram, and Summer savory. **Tip:** Basil is very delicate and is the first plant to die if the weather turns cold.

Biennials

Biennials re-grow in the 2nd year and are replaced at the end of that season. However, it is best to overlap with new plants in the second season or your supply will be short lived (e.g., parsley will bolt to produce seed early in the 2nd year and the taste will change).

Note: in general, flavor and texture changes in bolting plants and most often becomes bitter like the milky fluid in tall lettuce plants about to flower.

Perennials

Perennials are plants come back year after year unless the winter is too harsh: Chives, Garlic chives, Fennel, Lavender (see x), Mint, Oregano, Rosemary (x), Sage, Tarragon (x), Thyme, Winter savory (x) [x = ours do not survive Ottawa winters but some will survive in microclimates near fences, walls, or buildings]. Most herbs in containers must be treated as annuals and replaced every year as containers are often one zone colder (e.g., 4b instead of 5a) and conditions are harsher as in colder and dryer. Of course, you can always bring them indoors for the winter if you have the space and the right growing conditions. On the other hand, you might experiment with transferring herbs to a 2-layer poly tunnel (polytunnel in a polytunnel – see on-line “growingagreenerworld” with Joe Lamp’l) or an insulated cold frame so you can retrieve and relocate them in the spring. We have used the cold frame successfully but, unfortunately, there are no guarantees.

Potting your herbs

- Self-watering pots are a good choice for herbs needing well drained but constantly moist soil.
- Large pots reduce labour & offer more root room for high density planting: plant 2, 3, or 4 herbs together.
- Small pots are great for single plants; however, the smaller the pot, the greater the labour in watering, fertilising, and aerating. Also the size of the pot may limit the growth of the plant which may or may not be desirable depending on what you wish to accomplish. Succession planting (seed new pots every 2 weeks) could be a solution if small pots are necessary. We have done this successfully.

- Protect pots from drying and damaging winds, sunscreen pots if the sun is too intense, and shelter pots from excessive rainfall which will wash away the water-soluble plant food in the potting mix.
- **Caution:** some perennial herbs are invasive and need to be strictly controlled (e.g., oregano, all mints) so portable containers are best to isolate and confine them rather than allowing them to have their way and run wild in plots, raised beds, cold frames, box beds, or elevated beds. They will take over a bed!



Culinary Herbs! Great for gardening in small spaces: window ledges, balcony rails, sides or tops of fences ... or even a cluster of herbs all in one pot.

Herb Harvesting

- **Cut mornings after dew evaporates - oils are strongest.**
- **Cut no more than 1/3.**
- **Take older, outer leaves branches first.**
- **Remove flower heads to postpone seed setting.**
- **Re-refridge in water, paper bag, or plastic + holes + paper towel sheet as moisture sink inside plastic bags.**



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Long term storage



Frozen herb butter



Herb bundles for IQF freezing



Air Drying

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