

EDIBLE GARDENING

Herbs for Beginners

by Jim Long

Being able to cut fresh herbs from your garden for a meal is a delight, but first-time herb growers often face tough decisions when planning a garden. What kind of soil and site do herbs need? And most of all, with so many common herbs to choose from and limited space, what should I grow? Here are a few ideas to help you get started.

First, think about what types of cuisine you enjoy most. Each has herbs that set them apart, but they also have several in common. Italian cuisine often includes Genovese-type basil, Italian oregano, garlic, and flat-leaf parsley. Indian dishes use coriander, cumin, garlic, ginger, chilies, and turmeric. Traditional Mexican foods rely on chilies, Mexican oregano, garlic, coriander, thyme, and cumin.

Also, consider the space you have for growing. The closer your herbs are to the kitchen, the more often you'll use them. Planters on the deck work well, as does a raised bed near the patio. A classic herb spiral is another option, as is interplanting herbs among your ornamental plants.

Many herbs are native to places with thin rocky soil, so they will thrive in ordinary garden soil as long as it is well drained. If growing in containers, avoid potting soil that includes fertilizer.

POPULAR HERB CHOICES

Here are some of the most popular herbs to grow:

Basil (*Ocimum basilicum*), an annual and the favorite herb nationwide, is an easy one to grow. Plant out a nursery-purchased seedling in spring after danger of frost has passed or start from seed indoors about seven weeks before the last frost. You can start harvesting leaves in about six weeks. Pinch or prune any flower buds that begin to form to keep plants producing foliage. Prune the plant back by up



Genovese basil, above, is a staple for a wide range of Italian dishes, especially pesto. Many herbs like chives, left, can be easily grown in containers.



to one-third every three or four weeks for continuous, tasty production. There are at least two dozen kinds of basil including Genovese, Thai, lemon, lime, and holy. Each has its own distinct flavor.

Chives (*Allium schoenoprasum*) are also easy to grow, take up little room, and, as a perennial, will come back year after year. Start with a small potted plant in spring and let it share the space with other herbs. Give about 12 inches between it and the next plant. In a season's time it will spread to about 12 or



Coriandrum sativum, above left, produces both cilantro (leaves and stems) and coriander (seeds). Curly-leaf parsley, above right, and variegated thyme, right, have ornamental foliage.

14 inches across. You can clip leaves often during the summer to use in dips, salads, and egg dishes. Once the flowers bloom, use those to make a delightful salad vinegar or as accents for salads.

Cilantro (*Coriandrum sativum*) is a cool-season annual, meaning it will do well planted from seed in very early spring. You can plant more seed every two or three weeks for a longer harvest season but be aware that once the days get longer in spring and the weather warms, cilantro quickly goes to seed and becomes soapy tasting. Don't neglect to harvest the seedpods, however, which when dried yield the spice known as coriander. Some varieties such as 'Slow-Bolt' produce slightly longer, but all cease once the weather gets hot.

Oregano (*Origanum vulgare*), known as the "pizza herb," is a cold-hardy perennial. Start with a potted plant in the spring. It will be perfectly happy near chives and parsley in a planter on the deck. Like most herbs, the more you shear and harvest this low grower, the better the flavor will be. Some varieties like Greek have a sharper, hotter flavor than the milder Italian.

Parsley (*Petroselinum crispum*) is a biennial herb, but grow it as an annual,

because the second year it quickly goes to seed and the leaves become bitter. Flat-leaf Italian parsley has the most flavor, but you may also want to grow the familiar curly-leaf variety. Buy plant starts in spring, or plant seed indoors about seven weeks before the last frost. Parsley is a bit more frost-hardy than basil, although most people plant both outside at the same frost-free time.

Thyme (*Thymus* spp.) is a happy perennial that likes to spread out and hang over the edge of pots or raised beds. Start with a potted plant in spring. Forget about fertilizing, it doesn't need it. You can start harvesting when the plant is around eight to 10 inches



across, cutting just a few sprigs. Thyme can be found in a wide array of "flavors" including lemon and caraway, as well as more specific kinds like French, German, and English.

The best advice I can offer to new herb gardeners is don't be afraid. Plant more than one of each herb in different locations and see which spot does best. Experiment with the flavors by chopping some in salads, putting them on sandwiches, and adding them to marinades. ■

Jim Long is the author of numerous books on herb growing and cooking. He lives in Blue Eye, Missouri.

Sources

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