

Herbs from the Ground Up

To the inexperienced herb gardener, the incredible variety of tastes, scents and textures in the herb garden can be overwhelming—rather like attending a rowdy family reunion with many unfamiliar names and faces. But bit by bit, family relationships are sorted out, quirks and eccentricities are understood, and personalities are revealed. Since herbs are defined by their purpose—their usefulness to man—and not by their botanical classification, the task of learning how to grow them can seem quite daunting. Yet anyone can learn to have a “green thumb,” even without being born with one! A basic understanding of good horticultural practices is essential. Learning about the life cycle of a particular herb and its place of origin will help the gardener select the right location and deliver the best care for each plant. Finding the common denominators for successful growing will simplify meeting the needs of a wide variety of herbs.

The “secrets” of happy herbs are simply no secret—just good gardening. Many herbs are quite adaptable to a range of growing conditions if sound horticultural practices are observed:

Sunlight: a generous ½ day of light, preferably morning light with some afternoon protection. No one knows “full sun” like a Texan. Many herbs will tolerate light shade; only a few thrive in deep shade.

Soil Preparation: Add organic matter (compost) and expanded clay shale to your beds—at least 2-3 inches of each, tilled in. This will improve the drainage and texture of clay soils, which will mean better root development, healthier plants and a greater availability of soil nutrients. Most herbs just don’t like wet feet. Raised beds will also assist in drainage (and maintenance and harvesting for the gardener.)

Water: Give plants a thorough watering, not just a sprinkle, and back off to let the soil dry a bit. Don’t water by the day of the week, or during the heat of the day. Group plants according to their water needs—many herbs prefer to stay on the dry side, once they’re established. Avoid frequent wetting of the leaves from lawn sprinklers. Consider drip irrigation for efficient water use.

Fertilization: Easy does it. Your goal is a moderate rate of growth. You may prefer a water soluble organic formulation, a pelleted organic fertilizer, or synthetic time-release granules. Avoid high nitrogen fertilizers which induce rapid, lanky growth that is more susceptible to insect and disease problems.

Mulch: Just do it. You will conserve water, cut down on weeds, regulate soil temperature, keep plants cleaner for harvesting, improve the appearance of your garden, and add to soil nutrients as the mulch decomposes. Some of the Mediterranean herbs (especially lavender) may benefit from a mulch of pea gravel, which reduces the humidity around the base of the plant and reflects light and heat into the crown of the plant.

Problem Solving: Reduce pests and diseases by planning, careful monitoring, and good horticultural practices. Who’s at fault? Did you overwater, not provide good drainage or air circulation? Did you put the right plant in the wrong place, or did you select a plant poorly adapted to your area? Unfortunately, some herbs such as French Tarragon, Sweet Woodruff, and Lady’s Mantle are seldom happy in the climate and soils of North Texas. Learn to say “no” to synthetic pesticides, since most are not registered for general use on herbs. Learn to say “yes” to biodiversity and beneficial insects and common sense.

Herbs for Small Spaces

Many herbs are quite well-suited for growing in small gardens and courtyards, narrow borders and pathways and small raised beds, as well as in a wide variety of containers. Because herbs can offer so much pleasure in so little room, they are wonderful plants for people who live in apartments, condos, and zero lot line homes. People who don't have the time or energy or strength to care for a large garden area often find that herbs are the answer to their gardening urges.

There are many advantages to container growing:

- (1.) Pots can be moved to receive optimum growing conditions as the seasons change.
- (2.) Invasive herbs can be controlled (watch out for those naughty mints!)
- (3.) Tender herbs can be moved inside for protection from freezing temperatures.
- (4.) Plants can be placed at a convenient height for watering, harvesting, and enjoyment.
- (5.) No tilling or weeding is necessary.
- (6.) Plants can be easily replaced as necessary, keeping containers attractive and productive.

Containers need to provide enough space to accommodate the root system of the herb, and drainage openings to prevent "wet feet." Plants are generally graduated to larger containers as they grow—this helps prevent overwatering a very small plant in a very large container. Ordinary garden soil does not drain well in containers, and it may harbor disease and insects. Use commercial soilless mixes that are light and fast draining, or blend your own.

Consider the wide variety of containers for growing herbs. What can you add to this list?

Terra Cotta, Ceramic, and Plastic Pots	Whiskey Barrels
Strawberry Jars	Window Boxes
Cement Blocks	Hanging Baskets
Old Wheelbarrows and Wagons	Hypertufa Containers
Wooden Tubs	Old Sinks, Horse Troughs

Herbs in containers are quite vulnerable to the elements. Check soil moisture every day, especially in warm weather. It is best to water in the morning, thoroughly soaking the root ball and keeping the foliage as dry as possible. During the heat of summer, try to raise containers off the concrete or brick. If you cannot bring containers indoors during freezing weather, try wrapping the pots with old carpeting or burlap. Cover the plants and place them in a protected location.

You may use a water soluble fertilizer about every two weeks during the growing season, or a balanced, time-release fertilizer designed for container grown plants. Remember that nutrients leach out rapidly with frequent summer waterings. Top-dress the container with mulch or finished compost.

Growing herbs indoors is problematic—a temporary solution at best for most gardeners, since the majority of herbs require far brighter light and better air circulation than the average home can provide. Plants will tend to become spindly; leaves will yellow and fall off, and the confused gardener will often overwater in an effort to save the herb. Insect and disease problems that are seldom experienced in the outdoor garden may create havoc indoors. The gardener may need to provide supplemental lighting and a fan for circulation. In most cases, herbs grown indoors will need to be periodically replaced, and will not be as productive as those grown outdoors.

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