

A Kitchen Herb Garden for North Texas

- Basil: *Ocimum* spp. Most basil is a warm season annual, easily grown from seed once the soil and weather have warmed in late spring. Transplants can be purchased or grown from tip cuttings, too. Early and frequent light harvesting will prevent basil from going to seed too quickly, and will produce fuller, more attractive plants. There are many varieties of basil: some sweet, some spicy, some lemony, others camphory or medicinal and less suitable for culinary use. The summer harvest is readily preserved for winter use when chopped, processed with a small amount of oil, and frozen as a concentrated paste. Sweet basil forms the backbone of many Mediterranean dishes; spicy basil is essential in Southeast Asian cooking. Basil may also be added to desserts and teas—even the flowers are edible. The plants grow rapidly in the summer, so feed and water them regularly.
- Bay: *Laurus nobilis*. A nice container plant, bay needs protection from hot afternoon sun and extreme cold. It is hard to propagate, initially slow growing, and may be subject to scale. Leaves can be used fresh or dried, and are suitable for long cooking times, but they should be removed before serving. Do not confuse the plant with “California bay” or any of the toxic laurels.
- Chives: *Allium schoenoprasum*. The delicate onion flavor is indispensable in the kitchen, and the small, clumping plants are pretty in a border. Lavender flowers (also edible) add a nice touch. Transplants are widely available at garden centers, since chives grow rather slowly from seed. Leaves may be chopped and frozen with water in ice cube trays, since they do not dry well. Chives seem to appreciate regular feeding and supplemental moisture during dry spells. They may die to the ground in the coldest weather, but will reappear reliably in early spring. Harvest by cutting whole leaves near the ground, around the outside edges of the clump. (Garlic chives, *Allium tuberosum*, are more rambunctious in both the kitchen and the garden. The leaves are flat—not tubular—and the flowers appear in summer in starry white clusters.)
- Cilantro: *Coriandrum sativum*. A cool season annual, cilantro is easily grown from seed planted in early spring or, even better, in the fall. It will typically survive our winters and will produce large, leafy plants before going to seed as the weather warms up. The fresh leaves add a distinctive and authentic flavor to many regional cuisines—but they are an acquired taste for some people. Leaves can be processed in a small amount of oil and stored in the freezer. The ripened seeds, known as coriander, have a very different citrusy taste. Cilantro’s tiny flowers are a magnet for beneficial insects.
- Dill: *Anethum graveolens*. An annual easily grown from seed, dill performs best in the cooler weather of spring and fall. Unless the ripening seed heads are collected it will re-seed abundantly. This herb provides a one-two punch: both leaves and

seeds have a wide variety of culinary uses. Freezing the leaves in water, stock or oil is a preferred method of preserving the fresh flavor. Dill vinegars are delicious, too. Dwarfed varieties of dill may be more suitable to container growing, since common dill may reach 5 feet or more. Dill is a host plant for the swallowtail butterfly, and its flowers are attractive to beneficial insects.

Fennel: *Foeniculum vulgare*. A tall, feathery perennial, fennel should be grown separately from its look-a-like, dill. (Seedling crosses can result.) Mediterranean cooks prize the anise flavor of fennel's leaves, seeds and stems—so do swallowtail caterpillars. An annual bulbing type of fennel, called Florence fennel or finocchio, is not as well suited for our hot climate.

Lemon Grass: *Cymbopogon citratus*. A must for the teapot and for authentic Asian cuisines, lemon grass is not reliably winter hardy. Clumps may be dug in the fall and potted up for protection. Leaves can be used fresh, frozen or dried, but be careful since they are very sharp. Small pieces of the fleshy stems are often added to soups, rice, stir-fries, or teas and removed before serving.

Lemon Verbena: *Aloysia citriodora*. An ordinary looking spindly shrub, it has a heavenly flavor and aroma. Some winters it will survive outdoors, leafing out from the roots. If container grown, the plant will often lose its leaves and go dormant when brought inside. (Don't overwater!) Dried leaves retain their flavor for a very long time—nice for winter teas. Lemon verbena is wonderful in a variety of desserts—custards, cakes, breads, cookies—as well as in fruit salads.

Mexican Mint Marigold: *Tagetes lucida*. An attractive, anise-flavored herb native to South Texas and Mexico, this lovely plant deserves to be better known in the kitchen. It is reliably winter hardy, although it may die to the ground with a hard freeze. Small gold flowers appear in the fall. It is often used in herb vinegars, teas, salads, sauces, fish and chicken dishes.

Mints: *Mentha* spp. The many varieties of mint can be roughly divided into two flavor categories: spearmint and peppermint. Recipes calling for “mint” usually refer to a spearmint type. Mints are easily propagated from divisions or cuttings and are so vigorous that they must be contained to keep them from overrunning the garden. Harvest them frequently to encourage new growth and to prevent blooming. (Growing mint from seed may not produce exactly the plant you were expecting, since they hybridize readily. Some desirable varieties are sterile.) Lemon Balm (*Melissa officinalis*) is a close relative and the original “no brainer” herb.

Oregano: *Origanum* spp. A large genus of low-growing, mostly perennial herbs, many oreganos are valuable in the kitchen, others highly ornamental in the garden. Oreganos are often grown from transplants, cuttings or divisions, since those grown from seed are quite variable. Avoid the flavorless or coarsely flavored

plants in the garden center unless you are looking for a plant that is strictly ornamental—and many of those do have eye-catching blooms. Let your nose and your palate be your guide. Sweet marjoram (*O. majorana*) is a delicately perfumed, tender perennial of this genus.

Parsley: *Petroselinum crispum*. A biennial often grown as an annual, parsley performs best in the cooler seasons and will stay green all winter. As it begins to bloom, the leaves become tougher and the plant is usually replaced. Parsley can be grown from seed. Germination will be hastened if the seeds are pre-soaked. Two familiar forms exist: the curly leafed type and a flat leafed (Italian) type with a more pronounced flavor. Use the leaves fresh or frozen. Swallowtail butterflies will seek out the plants to lay their eggs, so plant plenty!

Rosemary: *Rosmarinus officinalis*. Handsome in the garden and indispensable in the kitchen, rosemary is one the best loved herbs. It is very slow to grow from seed, so transplants, cuttings or layerings are preferred methods of propagation. Many upright varieties are reliably winter hardy—the creeping or prostrate varieties less so. Rosemary may be used frozen or dried, but since it is evergreen, why bother?

Sage: *Salvia* spp. The common garden sages (*S. officinalis*) are native to the Mediterranean, and they often prove difficult to grow in humid conditions and heavy clay soil. They are sensitive to overwatering and prone to fungal diseases. But the complexity of the fresh flavor far surpasses the musty taste of commercially packaged sage. Hundreds of other sages are found in the New World. Not all of them belong in the kitchen, but many are highly ornamental, thriving in every conceivable garden condition: shade, bogs, deserts, high altitudes.

Salad Burnet: *Poterium sanguisorba*. This small, mounding evergreen perennial produces its best cucumber flavor in the cooler seasons. Easily started from seed, salad burnet is lovely in cream cheese spreads, dips, herb butters, vinegars, and salads, of course.

Scented Geraniums: *Pelargonium* spp. This large genus of tender perennials from South Africa offers a wide range of scent, flavor, texture, leaf shape and color for the beginning herb grower. Although the blooms are not typically large and showy, the plants are attractive in containers or grown as annuals in beds and borders. Most are easily started from cuttings. The rose, lemon and mint scented varieties are especially useful in teas, desserts, scented sugars and vinegars. The edible flowers are beautiful in ice cubes or scattered on salads, cakes and puddings. Many of the scented are used in potpourri, perfumes, soaps and cosmetics. Some varieties are sensitive to overwatering; most will appreciate afternoon protection from hot sun.

Thyme: *Thymus* spp. In spite of their tiny leaves and small stature, the thymes pack a punch in the kitchen and garden. With hundreds of varieties and hybrids, thymes are often propagated by cuttings, layerings or divisions in order to get “true” types. Most thymes grown in well drained soil and adequate sunshine will be winter hardy throughout Texas. They are generally divided into three groups: upright “shrublets” commonly used in cooking, creeping varieties 3-6 inches tall, and very flat creepers only an inch or two tall. Leaves hold their flavor if dried quickly or frozen in oil. Note: stripping the leaves from cut branches is very time-consuming!

Winter Savory: *Satureja Montana*. A perennial low-growing evergreen, winter savory has tiny leaves with a peppery, spicy bite. Harvest the tender new growth for best flavor in hearty bean dishes, soups and stews. This herb should be better known in American kitchens, especially in the Southwest, where jalapenos reign. (The annual summer savory, *S. hortensis*, doesn’t last long in our hot climate.)

--Wishing you good taste and good growing—
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