

Starting the Kitchen Garden

Generally speaking, it is best to start rather small—with a limited number and variety of herbs, in order to avoid overwhelming the inexperienced gardener. One or two plants of each type will often be sufficient for a small family (no need for a 30 foot row of savory!) Keep in mind the mature size of each plant, to assist in spacing, and the moisture needs, to assist in grouping. Think about flavors you like and herbs you already use often. (Hate the taste of licorice? Don't put fennel at the top of your list to purchase.) Be aware that the "herb habit" is addictive—it won't be long before you are looking for more space in your perennial border or vegetable garden or another pot to add "just one more."

Do your homework (don't whine) before going to the garden center to buy plants. Amend the soil with organic matter (for good drainage) and be sure the location has a sunny exposure. Plan before you plant—both you and your herbs will be better off. Mild winter days can be a perfect time for this outdoor work, and you need an excuse to get off the couch!

Timing is everything. Some annual herbs prefer the cooler seasons of the year—cilantro and dill, for example. If you dawdle til June to plant them, they will never make a go of it. Better to wait until Fall and try again. Others like it hot, like basil. If you jump the gun in early spring, they will simply sulk and never thrive. Most perennial herbs (perennial to North Texas, that is) may be planted after frost danger is past, or early enough in the Fall to become established before cold weather arrives. Tender perennial herbs, or those that may be only marginally hardy in a North Texas winter, may be treated as annuals or grown in containers so that they can be protected.

Many annual herbs can be easily started from seed right in the garden (basil, chervil, cilantro, dill, arugula, and the biennial, parsley.) Perennials are much slower to establish from seed, and some of them, like the mints and thymes, may not produce exactly the variety or flavor you were expecting. Try transplants from the garden center for quicker gratification, or cuttings and divisions from friends' gardens. Choose the flavor and scent that appeals to you—a flavorless oregano at the nursery will not develop flavor later.

You may begin harvesting fresh herbs as soon as the plants are big enough to withstand some cutting. Gentle, regular pruning will induce plants to produce more new growth, tender and full of flavor. Avoid hard cutting in the extreme summer heat—some herbs, like the thymes may not recover from the trauma. (An exception is any annual herb nearing the end of its life cycle. The whole plant may be pulled up and all usable leaves harvested.) Generally speaking, the oil content of the plants is

greatest in the morning hours, before the heat of midday, so harvesting is best done just after the dew has dried.

Look at the growth habit of the plant before pruning it. Plants growing from a central crown (parsley) or with a clumping habit (chives) are often cut around the outer edges, near ground level. Don't just give these plants a "butch" haircut. Woody or semi-woody plants (sage, rosemary) are often tip pruned, rather than having leaves pulled off at random. Entire branches may be removed to shape a woody herb or reduce its size.

Although fresh herbs for cooking are the ideal, the freshly preserved home harvest is a close second. Many herbs can be dried by hanging in small bundles, away from sunlight. Leaves can also be stripped off the cut stems and placed in a single layer to dry quickly on paper towels or screening. If space allows, small amounts of herbs can be dried in a frost-free refrigerator. Microwave and oven drying are often the last resort, since it is far too easy to "cook" the herbs. When the leaves are crispy dry, they should be stored—as whole as possible—in tightly fitting containers in a cool, dark place (not in the kitchen window or on top of the stove!)

Since many herbs lose much of their flavor when dried, freezing is often a better alternative. Leaves may be frozen whole, on cookie sheets, and placed in freezer bags. Leaves can be chopped and covered with water in ice cube trays. These cubes can be put in freezer containers. The method of achieving the most intense, "fresh" flavor is to chop or puree leaves in a small amount of oil, creating a concentrated paste. These herb-and-oil mixtures must be frozen for safety, since bacteria can easily grow in an anaerobic, non-acid environment. Scrape or chunk off the amount needed for your recipe (remember that it is very concentrated) and return the container to the freezer. Properly stored, these blends should last six months to a year.

If you are just beginning to cook with fresh herbs, remember that the fragrant and flavorful oils will evaporate quickly, so add them in the last few minutes of cooking. (Bay is an exception. Rosemary, thyme and oregano can generally stand longer cooking, also.) Use the leaves and tender green tips only, since woody stems will be tough and bitter. Many cookbooks will indicate the amounts of either fresh or dried herbs to be used in a recipe. If there is no guide, you may need two to three times the volume of the dried herb called for, since the leaves shrink considerably as they dry. Don't be afraid to substitute, improvise and experiment as you season your food with your garden's bounty. You will quickly learn when a dish looks and smells right—not overpowered by the herb or seasoned so lightly that the herbal flavor is lost. You may wish to begin

with some of the standard pairings—rosemary and lamb, mint and new potatoes--for example. But don't allow "rules" to stifle your creativity.

Plan to invest in a good herb reference book: Southern Herb Growing by Madalene Hill and Gwen Barclay is an excellent one for beginners and beyond. Check out cookbooks that are bursting with herbal flavors: The Herb Garden Cookbook by Lucinda Hutson is one that will tempt your tastebuds. Subscribe to a herb magazine like The Herb Companion. Join a local herb organization—there are many in the North Texas area that present educational programs and share information readily. (Check the calendar in your newspaper's garden section for meeting times and topics.) Harness your family computer to check out garden websites, herbal message boards and chats. The thyme is now to spice up your life!!!

Marian Buchanan
Dallas County Master Gardener
pachamama@sbcglobal.net