

GROWING AND USING HERBS

A Guide to Green City Living



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DEFINITIONS

Root Division:

Separating plants at the root zone so you end up with two or more plants.

Stem Cuttings:

Cutting is taken from a main or "parent" plant and encouraged to form its own roots.

Transplanting:

Moving a plant. This often takes the form of starting a plant from seed in optimal conditions, such as in a greenhouse, then replanting it in another growing location, usually outdoors.

Seedling:

A young plant, especially one that grows from a seed rather than from a cutting.

Culinary herbs combine the beauty and fragrance of flowers with the benefit of nutrition, adding flavour to your cooking, and providing a variety of medicinal uses. Herbs can be grown on their own, tucked into existing garden beds, planted into a specially designed bed, or even grown indoors.

Planning the Herb Garden

Location: Herbs do best in full sun, in a protected location on well-drained sandy-loam soil away from competing plants.

Selection: Herbs can be annuals, biennials or perennials, depending on the variety of herb you are growing and the climate in which it is grown. Select herbs so that you have a variety of shapes, textures, scents and leaf forms.

Spacing: Space requirements depend on how much variety you want, what you plan to do with the herbs, and how many of the herbs are perennial. A four-by-five foot bed accommodates about 15 different herbs.

Design: If space is available, plant herbs as a series of beds, creating a geometric form like a square. The plants will vary in each bed, but an overall design adds ease to harvesting and has an eye-catching effect.

Herb	Growth Pattern	Growing Tips
Basil	Annual	Start seeds indoors (March), transplant (May/June)
Oregano	Perennial (Tender)	Start seed indoors (March), or grow from stem cuttings of mature plants
Chives	Perennial (Hardy)	Divide mature plants by root division
Dill	Annual	Start from seed throughout the summer
Cilantro	Annual	Start from seed throughout the summer
Mint	Perennial (Tender)	Grow from stem cuttings of mature plants
Parsley	Biennial	Start seeds outdoors in April
Rosemary	Perennial (Tender)	Plant seedlings or grow from stem cuttings
Sage	Perennial or Annual	Start seeds indoors (March) and transplant (May/June), or grow from stem cuttings of mature plants
Thyme	Perennial or Annual	Start seeds indoors, or transplant seedlings



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Grower Beware!

Some herbs establish themselves very aggressively, spreading easily and out-competing other plants. Herbs that are self-seeding or spread by runners or rhizomes are potentially aggressive and can be controlled by planting in a container. Mint, evening primrose, lemon balm, yarrow, borage, St. John's Wort and bee balm are common culprits.



Caring for Herbs

- Most herbs do not require highly fertile soils. Work your soil well by loosening it with a garden spade or fork, and mix in some finished compost before planting.
- Once planted, herbs require no fertilizer and occasional weeding.
- Water herbs when the soil is dry three inches down into the soil, and then water thoroughly.
- To encourage new growth and extend your harvest, pinch off any flowers as they start to show.
- Apply a straw mulch to protect the roots of perennial herbs that remain in place over the winter. Some tender perennials will not survive the winter outside (potentially rosemary) and must be dug up in the fall, potted and grown inside for the winter.

Growing Herbs Indoors

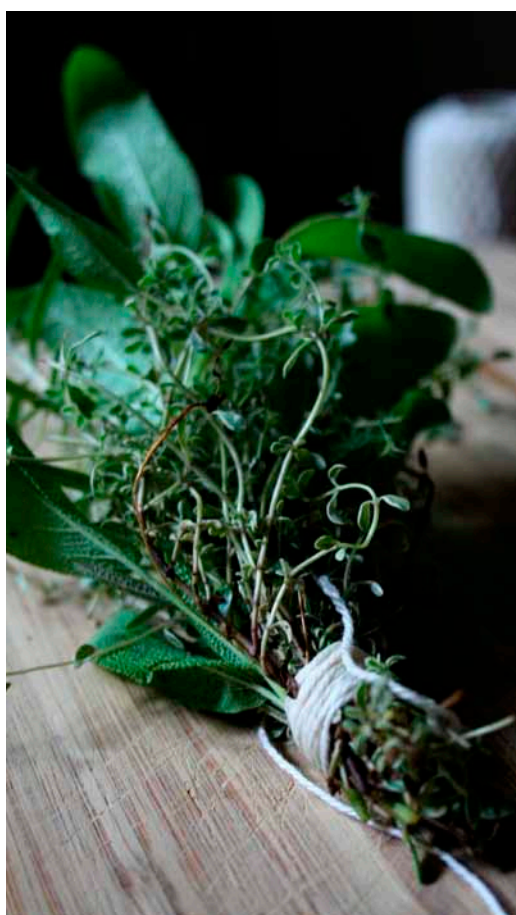
Herbs grown indoors require full sun, high humidity, warm days (10–25°C) and cool nights (15°C). The amount of sun that you get in the chosen window will dictate which herbs to select. Both southern and western exposures are generally sunny. Good choices are thyme, coriander, basil, lemon verbena, dill, parsley, sage and rosemary. Northern and eastern exposures will provide more shade and are not as warm. Shade tolerant plants that work well include parsley, peppermint, lemon balm and Cuban oregano.

Harvesting Your Herbs

- Harvest before flowering. Each type of herb will bloom at a different point during the season so keep an eye out for the buds. This will occur several times throughout the growing season if you are careful not to over-harvest.
- Each herb has an optimum time for harvesting. When growing plants for their aromatic leaves (such as rosemary, thyme, sage and savory), optimal harvesting is between formation of flower buds and half opening. For more tender annuals (such as salad burnet, basil, cilantro, parsley and fennel), the best time to harvest is early spring when leaves are young and fleshy.
- Annual herbs can be cut back to 4–6 inches high with each harvest, as long as you leave at least one pair of leaves. Perennials should be treated kindly, never removing more than one third of the plant.
- The optimum time to harvest herbs is in the morning, as this is when the oils and moisture are most concentrated in the leaves. The topmost leaves of plants are the most flavourful.



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Drying Herbs

Cut healthy branches from your herb plants, removing any dry or diseased leaves. Remove the lower leaves along the bottom inch and bundle four to six branches together. Make small bundles if you are drying herbs with high water content, such as basil, parsley, cilantro and mint.

- 1) Hanging Herb-drying Rack:** You can purchase herb-drying racks, or you can make your own out of readily available items, such as metal "S" hooks and a sturdy wooden hanger. Bundle five to eight branches together and hang upside down in a dark, warm, dry space. If the space feels humid, punch or cut several holes in a paper bag, and place the herb bundle upside down into the bag. Gather the ends of the bag around the bundle, and tie closed before hanging. Check in about two weeks and each week thereafter until your herbs are dry and ready to store.
- 2) Screen or Tray Herb-drying Rack:** Old window screens (or home-made racks built out of 1" x 1" lumber and some screening) are perfect for drying individual leaves and can be easily stacked. Dry herbs in a dark, warm, dry space. Drying takes 2–4 weeks depending on the moisture content of the herbs and the humidity of the air.

Freezing Herbs

Harvest the freshest, healthiest leaves, wash if necessary, and pat dry with paper towels. Spread the individual leaves on a small tray or cookie sheet, and place in the freezer. When frozen solid, place in airtight containers and return to the freezer. Frozen herbs are very brittle, and can be crumbled or chopped directly into soups, stews, dips and salad dressings.

Freezing Tip: Place a spoonful of chopped fresh herbs into each cell of an ice cube tray. Half-fill the tray with water and place in the freezer. Once the cubes are frozen, finish filling the tray with water and return it to the freezer. When you are ready to use the herbs, pop a cube out of the tray and add directly to the cooking pot.

Ten Great Uses for Herbs

- 1) Salad dressings and vinegars
- 2) Herbal butters and spreads
- 3) Cooking
- 4) Food preservation
- 5) Iced beverages
- 6) Herbal medicinals
- 7) Hot teas
- 8) Salves, creams and lotions
- 9) Poultices, compresses and soaks
- 10) Potpourri



Cooking Tips

- There are no hard-and-fast rules when cooking with fresh herbs. Use creativity, and experiment in small amounts to see what you like.
- Fresh herbs should be used at room temperature and chopped to release more flavour.
- Extended cooking dulls the flavour of herbs—add fresh herbs to soups or stews about 45 minutes before completing the cooking time.
- For refrigerated foods, such as spreads and dressings, add fresh herbs well in advance to allow the flavours to meld. (Note: fresh basil is an exception. If you add it to salad dressing overnight or longer, it becomes bitter.)
- Dried herbs are more concentrated than fresh, and powdered herbs are more concentrated than crumbled.
- Each herb is slightly different, but a starting formula is 1/4 teaspoon powdered herbs is equal to 3/4–1 teaspoon crumbled, or the equivalent of two to four teaspoons fresh.

Want to Know More?

- 1) *Gaia's Garden: A Guide to Home-scale Permaculture*. Toby Hemenway. Chelsea Green Publishing. 2001.
- 2) *New Book of Herbs*. Jekka McVicar. DK Publishing Inc. 2002.
- 3) *Culinary Herb Guide*: www.culinaryherbguide.com
- 4) *Garden Guides Herb Collection*: www.gardenguides.com/4075-herbs-collection.html
- 5) *Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs*: www.omafra.gov.on.ca/english/crops/facts/02-049.htm

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