

Growing an Herb Garden

Growing an herb garden can be a fun and easy opportunity for both experienced and new gardeners. A variety of herbs make fragrant and beautiful additions to landscapes and gardens and come in an assortment of colors, textures, smells, and sizes. For those with limited space, herbs are our flexible friends and can be grown indoors as well. Growing herbs for culinary purposes can add extra variety and flavor to many dishes. The flavors from homegrown herbs are stronger and more pungent than most store-bought herbs. Some individuals enjoy growing herbs for their medicinal purposes and incorporate them into gardens for their healing properties. Regardless of their purpose, herbs can offer a wonderful gardening experience with just a few useful techniques.

Selecting Herbs to Grow

Much of the selection of herbs depends on their desired uses. Which herbs complement your landscape? Which herbs do you most often incorporate into dishes? Which herbs offer medicinal values that you prefer? In addition to their uses, however, herb selection is extremely dependent on one's ability to grow them in the space and environment available.

For instance, when looking at herbs to incorporate into the landscape, knowing which herbs are annuals, perennials or even biennials is important. When adding herbs to ornamental gardens for their aesthetic or olfactory properties, selecting herbs that are perennials is often preferred because of their ability to grow and produce for several years from one planting. **Perennial herbs** are often started from young plants. Also with perennial herbs, seeds are not usually produced. Instead, gardeners are able to use

cuttings, bulbs, or roots to propagate more plants. Examples of perennial herbs grown in Oklahoma include mint, rosemary, thyme, and sage.

Many of the most common herbs in Oklahoma are **annuals**. These herbs produce fresh vegetative growth for one season. Examples of these include dill, basil, and cilantro. One remarkable thing about most of these annuals is the ability to harvest their mature seeds to use for planting in future years. If you wish to try this, allow the flowers of the plants to bloom and dry before the first frost. Herb seeds can be grown outside but are also easily transplanted. Seed starting for most herbs can happen in mid-February or six to eight weeks before transplanting outdoors after the last spring frost.

Some herbs grown in Oklahoma are **biennials**. These plants grow and mature over two years. Two of the most common biennial herbs are parsley and caraway. When growing parsley, the best foliage for flavoring is produced during the first season. Alternately, caraway is grown for its seeds. Seed production for biennials typically takes place during the second season. Caraway harvesting should be planned for the second growing season.

Location, location, location

Whether it be a kitchen window or a bright rock garden, herbs typically require a sunny location. In general, they usually require at least five hours of sun per day. Some exceptions exist. Cilantro, lemon balm, mint, and ginger are examples of herbs that can tolerate some shade. Additionally, most herbs require well-drained soil with just average moisture. Heavy clay soil is not recommended for herb planting. Instead, using raised beds with

amended soil or container gardening is preferred. Indoor gardens are a perfect option for gardeners who have limited room but enjoy growing culinary herbs. Herbs grown indoors still require adequate sunlight and ideally can be planted in south or west facing windows. Certain herbs, such as mint, tend to be garden bullies and take over if not limited. Planting these easily spreading herbs in containers can save a garden from being overcome by these plants.



Harvesting Herbs

It is recommended to harvest herbs from the newer tender growth at the top of the plant and to harvest in the morning after any dew has dried. Both harvesting new growth and removing any flower buds can encourage continued growth. Select only enough herbs for immediate use unless you plan to dry or freeze.

Drying herbs can additionally help your herb harvest last into the colder months. Some methods to dry herbs include hanging them, using a dehydrator, or placing them in the oven. Hanging herbs

from their stems in a dry, dark, well-ventilated, and warm location is an easy way to preserve them for future use. After they are dried, they should be stored in airtight containers in a dry and dark environment. Dried herbs typically store well for up to one year.

Freezing fresh herbs is another effective way to preserve your harvest. Washed, drained, and patted dry leaves can be placed on a cookie sheet to freeze. Once frozen, they can be transferred to freezer bags in single use quantities for storage. Freeze herbs at their peak of freshness and store frozen herbs for up to three to six months. Note that freezing does retain the flavor of the herbs but may change their appearance.

Pest Control for Herb Gardens

Many pest problems can be prevented by maintaining proper fertility and irrigation. Culturally controlling pests includes disposing of any infected herb material in the trash, controlling weed growth, providing barriers (covers) to insects, or mechanically removing the insects by hand. Encouraging beneficial insect growth is always useful. Additionally, if pesticides are required for pest control, refer to resources for ones that are safe and effective for food products.

Specific Herb Selections

Some of the most loved herbs in Oklahoma include:

Variegated varieties of herbs exist and can be an added interest to landscapes. Tricolor sage, purple basil, and golden lemon thyme can all be beautiful additions.



Tricolor sage



Purple basil



Golden lemon thyme

Basil comes in many different varieties. Usually, a couple of plants provide enough basil for a family. Basil can cross pollinate when planted closely together. You may not always get what you expect when harvesting seeds in areas with several varieties.

Pesto

½ cup pine nuts

4 cloves of garlic

5 cups of basils

12 ounces of Parmesan cheese, shredded or grated

2 cups of olive oil (May add more or less olive oil depending on how thick or smooth you want the pesto)

Salt, pepper, and lemon juice to taste

Rosemary likes drier, sandier soil and does well in containers. It is an excellent source of antioxidants.



Thyme grows well in dry conditions and provides soft, petite foliage. It is a perennial, so ceasing to trim the thyme in early fall allows it to harden off and reappear next season.



Parsley is a powerful natural diuretic.

Cilantro is an herb that people either love or hate. Some individuals have a genetic predisposition to strongly perceive the soapy-flavored aldehydes in cilantro leaves, while others immensely enjoy the flavoring.



Mint is available in a wide variety of colors, textures, flavors, and smells. It is a terrific addition to drinks and dishes and is quite easy to grow. Remember to plant in containers to limit excessive spreading as it can be quite invasive.

