



Herbs

Herbs are generally easy to grow, with most preferring sun and fast-draining soil. Perennial herbs such as rosemary, sage and lavender look good in landscape plantings and are commonly low maintenance. Many herbs can be container-grown.

Soil preparation for an herb garden is not too different from that for a vegetable garden. Most herbs will not do well in poorly drained clay soils unless a lot of work is done to improve drainage and tilth.

As with a vegetable garden, most herbs need a minimum of six hours of sun per day. There are, however, some herbs, such as parsley and mint, that will tolerate part shade. Once established and mulched, most perennial herbs will rarely need supplemental watering.

If you don't want to buy transplants of herbs, some can be started indoors in pots in a south-facing window or under fluorescent lights. Follow the same steps as if you were starting tomatoes or peppers indoors. Many herbs can also be seeded directly into the garden; simply follow the directions on the seed pack. Local nurseries and spring plant sales will have herbs in 4-inch pots for sale. These should be transplanted into larger pots or planted in the garden.

Here are a few notes about the most popular herbs:

BASIL is an annual with tender aromatic leaves. Basil needs a warm, sunny location and rich garden soil. Seedlings started indoors or purchased should not be planted in the garden until June. Keep spikes of flowers pinched out to encourage bushiness. Harvest individual leaves or shoots as needed. Successive plantings over several weeks will give you a long harvest season. Many varieties are available.

CHIVES, a perennial, have small onion-like leaves and tiny bulbs. Chives will grow in sunny or lightly shaded areas and moist, rich soil. Most chives are propagated from bulb divisions, but they can also be grown from seed. Chives are hardy and will be available for cutting most of the year. Leaves and flowers are edible.

CILANTRO is an annual with fernlike aromatic foliage and flat clusters of pinkish-white flowers. This herb needs sun and well-drained soil. Sow as soon as danger of frost has passed. Harvest leaves as needed and before flowering for best flavor. Cilantro will tend to bolt (flower) quickly in hot weather. Harvest seeds to use as coriander as soon as they turn beige, because they fall quickly after maturing. To dry seed heads, hang in bunches in a dark, dry place in paper bags or with paper spread beneath to catch the seeds. Successive plantings over several weeks will give you a long harvest season.

DILL is an annual that gets tall and bushy with feathery leaves and wide clusters of yellow flowers, both with a strong fragrance. Dill prefers full sun and well-drained soil. It can be sown several times during spring, starting as soon as the ground warms up. Harvest leaves as needed and before flower buds appear. Harvest seed heads after the seeds have turned brown. Seed heads can be cut and hung to dry like cilantro.

MINT is a perennial with square stems and aromatic leaves. Most mints like partial shade and moist soil, but they will grow almost anywhere. Mint should be grown in containers as it is invasive. Pinch stems and leaves and use as needed. Several culinary varieties are available.

OREGANO is a perennial that prefers full sun and good drainage. Marjoram, related to oregano, can be grown the same way. Several culinary varieties are available.

PARSLEY is a biennial usually grown as an annual. Parsley likes partial shade or full sun and well-drained soil. Set plants out in April or sow directly in the garden. Harvest older leaves as needed. Parsley is semi-hardy and can usually be grown in protected areas during the winter.

ROSEMARY is an evergreen perennial that works well as a landscape plant but can also be grown in a container. Sun and good drainage are essential. Leaves and flowers are edible.

SAGE is an evergreen perennial with gray-green, aromatic leaves. Sage likes sunny areas with dry, well-drained soil. Sage can be trimmed back in spring for bushier, fuller growth. Pick leaves as needed.

THYME is a perennial with small aromatic leaves that prefers full sun and good drainage. Several culinary varieties are available.

These and other herb varieties listed in the Territorial Seed catalog (or other local seed companies) can be reliably grown here: www.territorialseed.com. You needn't buy from them. Local nurseries generally stock many varieties of seeds and starts that do well here.

Additional Master Gardener Tip Sheets, including "Gardening Websites" and "Gardening Publications" are available at kingcountymg.org. Also see WSU's "Gardening in Washington State" at mastergardener.wsu.edu/resources/gardening-in-washington-state and free downloads of WSU gardening publications at pubs.extension.wsu.edu