

Herbs

By Ann Brooking
March 9, 2012

Enhancing Your Garden with Herbs

My precocious 12 year-old asked me, “Do you say ‘herb’ as in Herbert or is it ‘herb’ as in orb?” I tell her, “It is pronounced ‘erb’,” then realize I am not so certain. But for once I was right. According to the online New Oxford American Dictionary, Second Edition: “Although **herb** has always been spelled with an **h**, pronunciation without it was usual in British English until the 19th century, and is still standard in the U.S.” And the definition: “1. Any plant with leaves, seeds, or flowers used for flavoring, food, medicine, or perfume. 2. Botany: any seed-bearing plant that does not have a woody stem and dies down to the ground after flowering.”

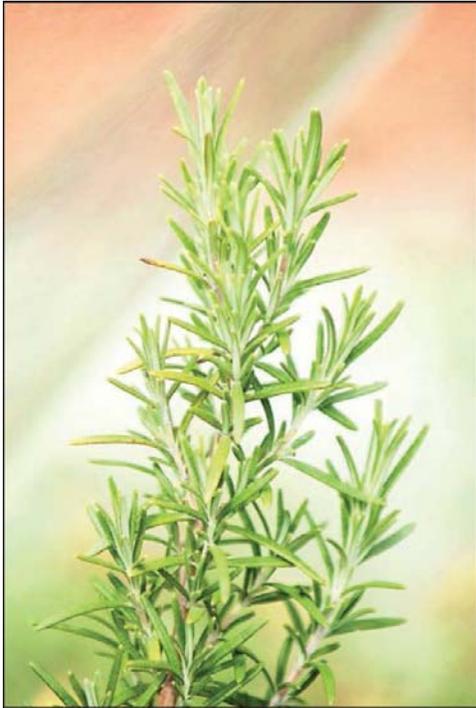
This simple definition belies the vast world of herbs. Master Gardener Becky Stinson shared a bit of her knowledge and enthusiasm for herbs. She will lead a free *Know and Grow Workshop* on cultivating, harvesting and preserving herbs (details below.) Stinson’s introduction to these tasty plants may whet your appetite for growing some of these edible plants in your garden.

Like garden-grown vegetables, fresh-grown herbs are a refreshing change. “What we usually think of as culinary herbs are the dry, packaged leaves we buy at the grocery store,” said Stinson. “Most of these derive from plants that hale from the Mediterranean region, such as basil, rosemary and thyme.” You might assume that growing such plants in our cool, wet climate might not do well. But Stinson says, “If you provide them with full sun, well-drained soil and no additional soil amendments, you will likely have a plant that can offer you flavor, scent and aesthetic appeal.

Tastiest Varieties

Local garden centers carry a staggering array of herbs. “If you want varieties traditionally used in cooking, look for plants with a scientific name that includes the word “*officinalis*,” said Stinson. For example, culinary sage has the scientific name of “*Salvia officinalis*”. Other varieties of sage are available, but they will not be as potent as the plant commonly used in kitchens worldwide.

Use fresh herbs in cooking whenever possible. Drying deteriorates the quality of the flavors. Herbs are only dried to preserve them for use when out of season or otherwise unavailable. And if you want herbs with potency, compost the ones that have been in your cupboard since – can you even remember when you got them? This is a great time to start ‘fresh’!



Rosemary grows under a small plastic A-Frame at the entrance to Concrete High School. The herb garden is part of a project in consumer science teacher Kerry Spikes' life skills class. The plastic plant shelter helped the herbs survive through the winter. **Photo by Scott Terrell / Skagit Valley Herald**

Best Times for Herbal Harvests

Some herbs, such as rosemary, can be harvested at any time, but your herbs will yield maximum potency if harvested at the right time. Stimson says, "If you are using the plant's leaves, the best time to gather them is when the plant is beginning to form flower buds," Imagine a warm, late morning stroll through your sunny garden, just after the dew dries, with the aroma of your plants beckoning you to partake of their charms. Such an inspiring way to begin preparing any meal!

Herbs such as lavender are harvested primarily for their flowers. For the most potent product, harvest these plants when the buds just begin to open. If you wait until the flowers open, they may get pollinated (that's the plant's goal.) At that point the plant's energy is directed toward reproduction – that is, creating seeds - and the flowers lose potency.

Remove leaves from stems to shorten drying time. Place leaves on a rack or screen - leave in a warm, dark, dry space with adequate ventilation. Do not place in direct sunlight. When the leaves crumble or snap, store in a glass jar with a rubber seal on the lid, in the dark. For optimum quality, replace leaves and flowers yearly. For roots, barks and seeds, replace every few years.

Happy Plants, Healthy Pollinators

To keep herb plants healthy, potent, and attractive, follow the practice of "right plant, right place". Read plant labels for ideal growing conditions. Stimson says, "Remember, Mediterranean herbs prefer minimal attention, as if baking on the sunny slopes of Provence —do not water them, do not fertilize them." They can be selectively pruned to keep them tidy. Early March is a good time to prune lavender. If cut back, lavender maintains its shape, preventing the development of long, woody stems. With the exception of rosemary, many familiar herbs can add soft, rounded shapes to your garden. Combine them with the hard edges of pavers or stone for a strong visual contrast.

Growing herbs has the added benefit of offering food for our local insect pollinators, including honeybees. Stimson says, “Native herbs such as kinnikinnik and nodding onion support our native pollinators.” Many of these insects are so tiny we never even know they are in our gardens! Despite their small profile, they are key to sustaining life. Many populations of native insects are dwindling, as urban development and pollution rob them of habitat and food. If you grow a wide variety of herbs which flower at different times of the year, our insect friends will be very grateful.



Left: Lemon thyme grows under a small plastic A-Frame at the entrance to Concrete High School. (Photo by Scott Terrell / Skagit Valley Herald) **Center:** Leaves of *Salvia officinalis* (common sage) are used in cooking. Any plant with the species name “officinalis” indicates it was used in ancient European herbal medicine. (Photo by Valerie Rose / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners) **Right:** Master Gardener Becky Stinson holds a pot of nodding onions. (Photo by Valerie Rose / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners)

Know & Grow Workshop

- What:** WSU Master Gardener Know & Grow
“Learn to Grow and Care for Your Favorite Herbs” - WSU Master Gardener Becky Stinson shares her expertise about culinary, fragrant, ornamental and medicinal herbs. Now's the time to get started so you can enjoy fresh herbs this year!
- When:** Tuesday, March 13
- Time:** 1:00 PM – 2:30 PM
- Where:** WSU Mount Vernon Northwestern Research and Extension Center
16650 State Route 536 (Memorial Highway)
- Cost:** Free
- Questions:** Call the WSU Skagit County Extension at 360-428-4270, ext. 0.

RESOURCES:

- Discovering Wild Plants, Janice Schofield, Alaska Northwest Books, 2003
- Herbal Renaissance: Growing, Using and Understanding Herbs in the Modern World, Steven Foster, Gibbs Smith Publisher, 2nd edition 1993
- 'The Complete Book of Herbs: A Practical Guide to Using Herbs, Lesley Bremnes, Studio Books, 1994
- The New Healing Herbs: The Essential Guide to More Than 125 of Nature's Most Potent Remedies, Michael Castleman, Rodale Press, 3rd edition, 2010