

ASK THE MASTER GARDENER

In their great 1970's song Simon and Garfunkle sang about "Parsley, Sage, Rosemary and Thyme." They should have added oregano, chives and basil. It probably wouldn't have worked musically, but those are the seven most basic herbs to add spice to your garden and your cooking. All seven herbs are easy to grow. Some are perennials and some are annuals.

Parsley is a biennial, but is often treated as an annual. The dark curly leaves of French parsley has a mild flavor. For one with a strong flavor, you should try the flat leaf Italian parsley. Both grow in clumps about 2 feet tall and can stay green through mild winters. Cut off the thick stems when they begin to send up flower heads. When the leaves become tough and the flavor too strong replace the plants with new seedlings.

Sage is powerfully flavored and reminds us of the aroma of Thanksgiving stuffing. Garden sage (*Salvia officinalis*) is the most common variety of this herb, but other more colorful choices are the golden and green ('Icertina') and white and purple ('Tri Color') sage. All sages grow to be one and one half to two feet tall. Old British folklore tells of the belief that if sage flourished in a housewife's garden she was the one who ran her household. No other herb is more closely linked to women and women's ailments.

Rosemary has a strong pungent flavor that compliments lamb, poultry, and veal. *Rosmarinus officinalis* is a perennial often grown as a shrub. The upright 'Tuscan' grows to be 4 to 6 feet tall. There are low growing types also, such as 'Prostratus' which grows 2 feet tall, but can spread 4 to 8 feet. Sailors in ancient times believed if carried aboard a ship, rosemary would protect them from harm.

Oregano is known as the pizza herb. It is used in Italian, Greek and Spanish cooking. Once you plant an oregano plant in your garden, you have it forever. They reseed themselves in abundance. Oregano grows to two and a half feet tall if not pruned. There are many varieties of Oregano. *O. vulgare* is the most common. Others are golden creeping oregano 'Aureum', and Greek oregano, *O. heracleothicum*. A close cousin of oregano is marjoram. It grows to one or two feet tall and needs a moister soil. It has milder flavor than oregano.

Chives, a close relative of the onion has purple-clover like blossoms in the spring. The clumping onion-like leaves grow to two feet tall. It is an attractive plant to have in your garden even if you are not growing other herbs. It stays green in mild winters or it can be grown indoors on a window sill. The Venetian explorer, Marco Polo discovered chives while on a journey to China and carried them to the rest of the world. The lingering oniony smell of chives was believed to drive away evil spirits.

Basil is probably the most difficult herb to grow in our area because it thrives on warm weather. It cannot be planted out in the garden until night temperatures are 50 degrees or warmer. It is an annual and grows easily from seed. There are many different types of basil to try; dwarf basil from Greece and ones with lemon, licorice, cinnamon or clove scents. When the seedlings reach 6 inches, pinch back the tips to make the plants more bushy and pinch off any flower buds

that form. Basil is native to India. It was during his travel there that Alexander the Great became so impressed with this aromatic herb, Ocimum basilicum, that he sent seeds back to Greece.

The study of herbs, their place in history and their uses through the ages is a fascinating one. The next time you visit an herb garden give a thought to the evolution of the lowly parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme.

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