

# Basil Varieties

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April 3, 2020



## Versatile herb works for many purposes

All basil is related to the mint family and has been cultivated for more than 5,000 years around the world, mostly for culinary and medicinal purposes. There are well over 100 species to choose from. Most of us are familiar with sweet basil used in Italian cooking, but chefs from Asia, Egypt, Greece and other regions have used their own varieties of this herb to flavor their dishes. In ancient times it was used indoors in bunches to deter flies and steeped in water as a tonic to aid digestion.

Basil is lovely in patio containers mixed with other herbs or flowers. It can be planted into fragrance gardens or amassed in borders near a pathway where their scent will fill the air. Placed into fresh flower arrangements, it makes a colorful and fragrant filler.



**Top:** Purple Osmin Basil

**Bottom:** Genovese Basil

*Photos by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit  
County Master Gardeners*

Plants are easy to grow and versatile enough to fit into any garden plan. Try sowing your own seeds to obtain the variety you desire.

Sow certified clean seeds 8-10 weeks before planting outside in well-drained, light soil in a warm location away from drafts. Or sow directly in the garden once soil has warmed, often not until early June here in the Pacific Northwest if we have a cool spring.

Add a complete fertilizer, mixing well into the planting hole before inserting the transplant. Read the recommended amount per plant listed on the fertilizer package. Plant transplants 8-12" apart.

Water deeply at least once a week, especially in our dry months of July and August. Water daily if growing in a container. When plants are 4-6" tall, pinch off the center shoot to force side growth.

Continue throughout the season harvesting often and vigorously so flowers do not bloom. At season's end, allow flowering so you can harvest seed for next year.

Basil can also be grown indoors on a south-facing windowsill or under fluorescent or HID plant-growing lights.

Different basil varieties lend diversity for different flavor profiles. Lemon basil adds a lemony taste; Thai basil has a licorice flavor that works nicely in Asian dishes; and Holy basil (a sacred basil of the Hindus) is often used in East Indian cuisines.

Basil freezes well, mixed in a blender with a bit of olive oil. Add some garlic, pine nuts and parmesan to this blend to make pesto. Either can be frozen in a jar or in ice cube trays, popped out into plastic bags and kept in the freezer for instant additions to stews, soups, sauces and spreads. Steep purple basil in white vinegar for a flavored vinegar. Basil can also be dried or dehydrated.

Explore the many varieties of basil to find what works best for your purposes, be it culinary, medicinal or decorative. Find live plants in nurseries or view several types at the Discovery Garden in the herb and vegetable garden sections. Notice the color, texture and fragrance differences. Which would you like to try growing in your garden or home?

### **RESOURCES:**

- “Basic Garden.” Kate Ryan. Snohomish County Extension, August 18, 2014.  
<https://extension.wsu.edu/snohomish/basil-garden/>
- “The Many Uses and Types of Basil.” Dr. Leonard Perry, Horticulture Professor Emeritus. University of Vermont, University of Vermont Department of Plant and Soil Science.  
<https://pss.uvm.edu/ppp/articles/basil.html>
- “Basil makes a lovely addition to your garden – and your pesto.” Ciscoe Morris. The Seattle Times, June 7, 2017.  
<https://www.seattletimes.com/pacific-nw-magazine/basil-makes-a-lovely-addition-to-your-garden-and-your-pesto/>