



Herbs are some of the easiest plants to grow, and the payback is better tasting food for you and your family.

PHOTO COURTESY WORLD WIDE WEB

# Go to Pot with Your Herbs

Having them close by may entice you to use them more often in your cooking and beverages.

by Carol Barany for Yakima Valley Master Gardeners

**M**ost of last week was spent working at the Master Gardeners annual plant sale. I talked to hundreds of shoppers, renewing friendships with long-time veterans and giving encouragement to many who has never gardened

before. Every conversation was a reason to celebrate. Covid concerns had interrupted our sale in 2020 and 2021, and it felt good to be back.

It took longer than usual, but the weather is finally starting to warm, and it's time to get gardening. If you're looking for something new to try this year, why not plant an herb garden? I'm not suggesting the formal version, where geometrically shaped beds are lined with brick paths and precisely trimmed boxwood hedges.

Because herbs are happy growing in the simplest containers, you can grow a productive herb garden even if all the space you've got is a sunny porch outside your apartment door. Requiring minimal care and naturally resisting the diseases and pests that can plague more finicky plants, why buy herbs at the grocery store when you can easily grow them yourself?

For centuries, aromatic, lavishly flavored and colorful fresh herbs have been a garden's most useful harvest. If yours are growing a long trek from the kitchen, having a few of your favorites in a pot just outside the door or next to the grill means you'll actually use them. It's amazing how a few snips can turn a simple salad, burger, or pitcher of iced tea into something extraordinary.

**FIND A SUNNY SPOT**—Most herbs are Mediterranean natives, and need at least 6-8 hours of sun each day.

**PICK A POT**—Herbs thrive in a variety of containers, from plastic or clay pots to old wheelbarrows and washtubs, as long as there is adequate drainage. Waterlogged soil is the fastest way to kill an herb.

**FILL WITH POTTING MIX**—Plants growing in containers need potting mix, not garden soil. In general, allow each herb one gallon of potting mix. A 16-inch pot holds about

5½ gallons of mix and can support 5-6 plants.

**TIME TO PLANT**—Space the plant according to recommendations on the tag. Loosen up the roots before transplanting, and add soil until the level is 1” shy of the top. Pat the soil down firmly and water well.

**HOW TO FERTILIZE**—Most herbs grow naturally in lean soil without fertilizer, but will need a boost when planted in a container. Feed once a month with your favorite fertilizer, or use a slow-release fertilizer at planting time. Make sure it’s safe for use on edibles.

**WHEN TO WATER**—If the soil feels dry down to your first knuckle (about 1”) add water slowly and until it begins to drain from bottom. Container plants need more water than plants in the ground, especially those in terra cotta or wood pots. Keep the soil as moist as a wrung out sponge, and not overly soggy. When your herbs have developed mature root systems, you may need to water every day.

**HARVEST**—Do it regularly to prevent plants from flowering and going to seed, which signals that the season is over. By faithfully picking the tips of each stem, about the top inch or two just above a pair of leaves, new shoots will soon emerge, keeping the plant lush and productive.

Here are some suggestions for spectacular container combinations featuring your favorite herbs.

**MINT MEDLEY**—The perfect herb for the beginner, your success with mint is virtually guaranteed. An epic wanderer when planted directly in the garden, pot culture is the perfect way to keep this delectable controlled. Look for chocolate, grapefruit, pineapple, and apple flavors, in addition to spearmint and peppermint. With any of these, you can make mojitos your specialty drink this summer.

**EDIBLE FLOWER**—A scatter of blooms from calendula, chive, dwarf lavender, scented geranium, viola, pineapple sage, or compact trailing nasturtiums will transform a bowl of salad greens into a visual masterpiece in seconds. Avoid pesticides.

**MEDITERRANEAN FLAVORS**—Basil, marjoram, oregano, Italian parsley, upright rosemary, thyme, and sage have bright flavors that enhance the simplest recipes. Substitute a compact patio cherry tomato if you like.

**ASIAN INSPIRED**—Throw sweet basil, Thai basil, cilantro, garlic chives, gingerroot, Thai hot pepper, or lemongrass into a quick stir-fry and amp up the flavors.

Annual herbs like basil, cilantro, and parsley are productive for a single growing season. While you can bring them indoors in the fall, they're not likely to survive until spring or thrive at low indoor light levels. Perennial herbs such as rosemary, tarragon, thyme, sage, and mint can often be overwintered in a protected location outdoors if the pot is large enough, or in a cool, sunny room indoors.

