



GROWING HERBS FOR THE HOME GARDENER

Erv Evans, Extension Associate, Horticultural Science
 Jeanine Davis, Extension Specialist, Horticultural Science

An herb is any plant used whole or in part as an ingredient for health, flavor, or fragrance. Herbs can be used to make teas; perk up cooked foods such as meats, vegetables, sauces, and soups; or to add flavor to vinegars, butters, dips, or mustards. Many herbs are grown for their fragrance and are used in potpourris, sachets, and nosegays; or to scent bath water, candles, oils, or perfumes. More than 25% of our modern drugs contain plant extracts as active ingredients, and researchers continue to isolate valuable new medicines from plants and confirm the benefits of those used in traditional folk medicine.

Herbs as a group are relatively easy to grow. Begin your herb garden with the herbs you enjoy using the most. For example, choose basil, oregano, and fennel for Italian cooking; lavender and lemon verbena for making potpourri; or chamomile, peppermint, and blue balsam mint if you plan to make your own teas.

The optimum growing conditions vary with each individual herb species. Some of the herbs familiar to North Americans — such as lavender, rosemary, thyme, bay laurel, marjoram, dill, and oregano — are native to the Mediterranean region. These herbs grow best in soils with excellent drainage, bright sun, and moderate temperatures.

When growing herbs follow these basic guidelines:

- Plant herbs in average garden soil with organic matter added to improve texture and drainage.
- Choose a site that receives at least 6 hours of direct sun each day.
- Avoid ground where water stands or runs during heavy rains.
- Compensate for poor drainage with raised beds amended with compost.
- Apply balanced fertilizers sparingly to leafy, fast growing herbs. Heavy applications of fertilizer, especially those containing large amounts of nitrogen, will decrease the concentration of essential oils in the lush green growth.

Plan your herb garden by grouping herbs according to light, irrigation, and soil requirements. Most herbs enjoy full sun, but a few tolerate shade. Herbs can be classified as either annual, biennial, or perennial. Be aware of the growth habits of the plants before you purchase them. Some herbs, such as borage, anise, caraway, chervil, coriander, cumin, dill, and fennel, should be direct-seeded, because they grow easily from seed or do not transplant well. Other herbs, such as mints, oregano, rosemary, thyme, and tarragon, should be purchased as plants and transplanted or propagated by cuttings to ensure production of the desired plant (do not come true from seeds). Additional information on specific herbs can be found in Tables 1 and 2.

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Table 1. Growing Requirements, Propagation and Uses of Annual Herbs

Plant	Height	Spacing	Light Requirement	Propagation	Uses
Anise <i>Pimpinella anisum</i>	24"	10"	Sun	Grow from seed.	Leaves in soups, sauces, and salads; oil for flavoring; seeds for seasoning cakes, breads, and cookies.
Basil, sweet <i>Ocimum basilicum</i>	20 to 24"	6 to 12"	Sun	Grow from seed; grow transplants for early-season harvest.	Leaves in soups, stews, pasta sauce, poultry and meat dishes; flavors vinegar; teas.
Borage <i>Borago officinalis</i>	1 to 3'	12"	Sun	Grow from seed; self-sowing.	Edible flower; leaves in salads, teas, and sandwiches; attracts bees.
Calendula (Pot Marigold) <i>Calendula officinalis</i>	12"	12 to 18"	Sun, partial shade	Grow from seed.	Flower petals give color to soups, custards, and rice; cookies; vinegars; crafts.
Caraway <i>Carum carvi</i>	12 to 24"	10"	Sun	Grow from seed; biennial seed bearer, some cultivars are annual seed bearers.	Leaves in salads, teas, stews, and soups; seeds for flavoring cookies, breads, salads, and cheeses; roots can be cooked.
Chamomile, sweet false <i>Matricaria recutita</i>	1 to 2 ½'	4 to 6"	Sun	Grow from seed.	Tea, potpourris, garnish, crafts.
Chervil <i>Anthriscus cerefolium</i>	1 ½ to 2'	15"	Partial shade	Sow seeds in early spring; does not transplant well, not heat tolerant; needs light to germinate.	Leaves in salads, soups, and sauces; teas; butters.
Coriander (cilantro) <i>Coriandrum sativum</i>	24" to 36"	12 to 18"	Sun, partial shade	Grow from seed; goes to seed quickly, so plant frequently.	Entire plant is edible; leaves in stews and sauces; stems flavor soups and beans; seeds in sauces and meat dishes, potpourris, and sachets.
Dill <i>Anethum graveolens</i>	3 to 5'	3 to 12"	Sun, partial shade	Sow seed early spring.	Teas; seasoning for butter, cakes, bread, vinegars, soups, fish, pickles, salads, etc.; flowers in crafts.
Nasturtium <i>Tropaeolum spp.</i>	15"	6"	Sun	Grow from seed; does not transplant well.	Leaves, stems, and flowers have a peppery taste; use in salads.
Parsley <i>Petroselinum crispum</i>	6 to 18"	6"	Sun	Sow seed early spring; slow to germinate; soak in warm water; is a biennial grown as an annual.	Garnish; flavoring for salads, stews, soups, sauces, and salad dressings.
Perilla <i>Perilla frutescens</i>	36"	3 to 6"	Sun	Grow from seed.	Decorative plant; flavoring oriental dishes.
Summer savory <i>Satureja hortensis</i>	12 to 18"	10 to 12"	Sun	Sow seed in early spring, cuttings.	Mild peppery taste; used with meat, cabbage, rice, and bean dishes, stuffings, teas, butters, vinegars.

Common name/ Scientific name	Height	Spacing	Light Requirement	Propagation	Uses
Angelica <i>Angelica archangelica</i>	2 to 3'	3'	Partial shade	Grow from seed.	Stems raw or in salads; leaves in soups and stews; teas; crafts; closely resembles poisonous water hemlock.
Anise hyssop <i>Agastache foeniculum</i>	3 to 5'	12 to 24"	Sun, light shade	Grow from seed or division.	Attracts bees; edible flowers; leaves for flavoring or teas; crafts; seeds used in cookies, cakes, and muffins.
Artemisia <i>Artemisia spp.</i>	2 to 3'	24"	Sun, partial shade	Division.	Wreaths and other crafts; aromatic foliage.
Bee balm <i>Monarda didyma</i>	2 to 3'	12 to 15"	Sun, partial shade	Grow from seed or division; invasive rhizomes.	Attracts bees, butterflies, and hummingbirds; teas; flavors jellies, soups, stews, and fruit salads; edible flowers; dried flowers in crafts.
Burnet, salad <i>Poterium sanguisorba</i>	12"	18 to 24"	Sun, well-drained soil	Grow from seed or division.	Cucumber-flavored leaves used in salads, vinegar, butter, cottage cheese, and cream cheese; garnish.
Clary sage <i>Salvia sclarea</i>	5'	24"	Sun	Grow from seed; biennial.	Leaves in omelets, fritters, and stews; flavoring of beers and wines; oil.
Chamomile <i>Chamaemelum nobile</i>	2 to 8"	18"	Sun, partial shade; well-drained soil	Grow from seed, division, or stem cuttings.	Dried flowers for tea; potpourris; herb pillows.
Catnip <i>Neptea cataria</i>	3 to 4'	12 to 18"	Sun or shade	Grow from seed or division.	Teas; fragrance for cats.
Chives <i>Allium schoenoprasum</i>	12"	12"	Sun, partial shade	Grow from seed or division.	Edible flowers; leaves for flavoring, eggs, soups, salads, butter, cheese, dips, spreads, etc.
Comfrey <i>Symphythum officinale</i>	3 to 5'	3'	Sun	Grow from seed, cuttings, root division.	Safety of ingestion is highly questionable. Large, rambling plant; dyes, cosmetics.
Costmary <i>Chrysanthemum balsamita</i>	2 to 4'	12"	Sun, light shade	Division.	Garnish; fragrance.
Echinacea <i>Echinacea angustifolia</i>	1 to 2'	18"	Sun	Grow from seed or crown division.	Ornamental plant; used medicinally.
Fennel <i>Foeniculum vulgare</i>	4 to 5'	4 to 12"	Sun	Grow from seeds, difficult to transplant.	Entire plant edible; seeds in sausage and baked goods; leaves used with fish, vegetables, cheese spreads, and soups.
Feverfew <i>Tanacetum parthenium</i>	2 to 3'	12"	Sun, partial shade	Grow from seed or division.	Tea, crafts, dyes.
Geranium, scented <i>Pelargonium spp.</i>	12 to 24"	12 to 24"	Sun	Grow from stem cuttings.	Teas, potpourris, sachets, jellies, vinegars, desserts.
Germander <i>Teucrium chamaedrys</i>	10 to 12"	8 to 10"	Sun, partial shade	Slow to germinate from seed. Stem cuttings, layering, division.	Attracts bees, decorative plant.

Table 2. Growing Requirements, Propagation and Uses of Biennial and Perennial Herbs

Common name/ Scientific name	Height	Spacing	Light Requirement	Propagation	Uses
Horehound <i>Marrubium vulgare</i>	24"	15"	Full sun	Grow from seed, cuttings, or division.	Attracts bees; tea; flavoring in candy, crafts.
Hyssop <i>Hyssopus officinalis</i>	24"	15"	Sun or division	Grow from seed, stem cuttings, usage, potpourris.	Attracts bees and butterflies; mostly decorative.
Lavender <i>Lavandula angustifolia</i>	24 to 36"	18"	Sun	Grow from seed or stem cuttings.	Potpourris; herb pillows; crafts, vinegars and jellies.
Lemon balm <i>Melissa officinalis</i>	3'	2'	Sun, light shade	Grow from seed, stem cuttings, or division.	Teas; flavors soups, stew, fish, poultry, vegetables, and meat dishes; garnish; potpourris
Lemon verbena <i>Aloysia triphylla</i>	2 to 5'	12 to 24"	Sun	Grow from stem cuttings	Potpourris; herb pillows; lemon flavoring , for drinks.
Lovage <i>Levisticum officinale</i>	3 to 5'	2'	Sun, partial shade	Sow seeds late summer; division.	Seeds in breads, butters, and cakes; teas; leaves in soup, stew, cheese, cookies, and chicken dishes; root edible.
Marjoram <i>Majorana hortensis</i>	1 to 2'	12"	Sun	Grow from stem cuttings, division, or seed.	Flavoring for meats, salads, omelets, vinegars; jellies; teas; flower head for crafts.
Oregano <i>Origanum vulgare</i> and <i>O. vulgare subsp. hirtum</i>	24"	8 to 12"	Sun	Grow from cuttings or division.	Flavoring for tomato dishes, meat, poultry and pork stuffings; vegetables and sauces, etc.
Peppermint <i>Mentha x piperita</i>	36"	18"	Sun, light shade	Cuttings and division recommended; invasive rhizomes.	Teas, fragrance.
Rosemary <i>Rosemarinus officinalis</i>	3 to 6'	12"	Sun	Seeds slow to germinate; use stem cuttings, layering, or division.	Teas; flavoring for vinegar, jam, bread, butters, stuffing, vegetables, stew, and meat dishes.
Rue <i>Ruta graveolens</i>	3'	12 to 18"	Sun	Grow from seed, stem cuttings, or division.	Decorative plant
Sage <i>Salvia officinalis</i>	18 to 30'	12"	Sun	Grows slowly from seed; stem cuttings, division, layering.	Seasoning for meat, vegetable and egg dishes; stuffings.
Sage, pineapple <i>Salvia elegans</i>	2 to 3'	24"	Sun	Stem cuttings.	Attracts hummingbirds and butterflies; teas; potpourri; cream cheese; jams, jellies.
Santolina <i>Santolina chamaecyparissus</i>	24"	2 to 3'	Sun, needs good drainage	Slow to germinate from seeds..	Dried arrangements and potpourris; accent plant.
Sorrel <i>Rumex spp.</i>	3 to 4'	12"	Sun	Grow from seed.	Flavoring of soups, butters, omelets; some species of sorrel are toxic.
Southernwood <i>Artemisia abrotanum</i>	4'	18"	Sun, well-drained soil	Stem cuttings, division.	Teas; sachets; potpourris.
Spearmint <i>Mentha spicata</i>	18"	18"	Sun, partial shade	Cuttings or division recommended; invasive rhizomes.	Teas; flavors sauces, jellies, and vinegars; leaves in fruit salad, peas, etc.

Table 2. Growing Requirements, Propagation and Uses of Biennial and Perennial Herbs

Common name/ Scientific name	Height	Spacing	Light Requirement	Propagation	Uses
Sweet marjoram <i>Origanum majorana</i>	8"	12"	Sun	Grow from seed, division, or cuttings.	Flavors tomato sauces, eggs, etc. Leaves in salads, sauces, pizza, and meats.
Sweet rocket <i>Hesperis matronalis</i>	3 to 4'	24"	Sun	Grow from seed.	Salads.
Sweet woodruff <i>Galium odoratum</i>	8"	12"	Partial shade	Division.	Tea; sachets, dyes.
Tansy <i>Tanacetum vulgare</i>	3 to 4'	2 to 3'	Sun	Grow from seed or division	Toxic oil in leaves; decorative plant; crafts.
Tarragon <i>Artemisia dracunculus</i>	24"	12"	Sun	Division or root cuttings, stem cuttings are slow to root.	Sauces, salads, soups, omelets, meat, vegetable, and fish dishes.
Thyme, common <i>Thymus vulgaris</i>	4 to 12"	6 to 12"	Sun	Cuttings, seeds, or division.	Teas; attracts bees; sachets; potpourris; flavoring for poultry, fish, stews, soups, tomatoes, cheese, eggs, and rice.
Valerian <i>Valeriana officinalis</i>	2 to 5'	12 to 24"	Sun	Division is recommended over seeding.	Roots for flavoring; ornamental plant.
Yarrow <i>Achillea millefolium</i>	8" to 5'	12"	Sun	Seeds or division.	Crafts.
Winter savory <i>Satureja montana</i>	24"	18"	Sun	Grow in light, sandy soil from cuttings or seed; cut out dead wood.	Leaves used to flavor meat, fish, salads, soup, stew, and sausage.
Wormwood <i>Artemisia absinthium</i>	36"	12 to 36"	Sun	Seed germinate slowly; use stem cuttings or division.	Bitter flavor; toxic if large quantity consumed; ornamental plant, dried arrangements; repels insects