

Herbs for Harris County

Selections and Uses

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Anise (Annual)

A slow-growing annual that flowers approximately three months after planting, anise (*Pimpinella anisum*) grows to a height of 2 feet and produces yellowish-white flowers in umbrella-like clusters. It will grow best in a deep, fertile soil in a sunny, warm location and should be planted 6 to 10 inches apart in rows 2 to 3 feet apart. This herb is grown for its licorice-flavored seeds, which are widely used in breads and cookies and are ready for harvest about one month after bloom.

Artemisia (Perennial)

Many different herbs in this genus (*Artemisia* spp.) are grown for culinary use as well as for their aromatic and medicinal properties.

Basil (Annual)

Spicy globe basil (*Ocimum basilicum* 'Spicy Globe') is a small, globe-shaped ornamental type basil that can be used in cooking. Protect from leaf miners in fall.

Sweet basil (*Ocimum basilicum*) is the most common, easy-to-grow basil and is the most popular among all good cooks. Its large, glossy green leaves are great for pesto and a must for good basil vinegars. It is used primarily in seasoning spaghetti sauces, stews, soups and many other dishes.

Purple Ruffles (*Ocimum basilicum* 'Purple Ruffles'), although easy to grow, is not much used in cooking. It is, however, great for adding a couple of leaves to sweet basil in making basil-flavored vinegar, to give it a champagne pink color.

Mexican spice basil (*Ocimum basilicum* 'Mexican Spice') has a pungent flavor and is excellent for cooking and making vinegars. Its stems dry beautifully, making it suitable for dried arrangements, tussie mussies, and potpourris. It is also a great cultivar to grow just to enjoy in the garden.

Cinnamon basil (*Ocimum basilicum* 'Cinnamon') is excellent in cookies and cakes, and is another variety to add to both green and dried arrangements, especially for adding aroma.

Bay Laurel (Tree)

Bay laurel (*Laurus nobilis*) is a marvelous plant that can be grown either in a container or in the ground. If planted in the ground it can reach a height of 25–40 feet, but its height can be controlled when grown in a pot. It is cold hardy to about 20°F. If planted outside, choose a protected location with sunny south or east exposure. Fresh bay leaves are hard to beat, especially when used in butters and spreads. Bay leaf is also an important ingredient for stews, soups and sauces.

Borage (Annual)

Borage (*Borago officinalis*) grows 1–2 feet high and 2–3 feet wide, producing gray-green, fuzzy, cucumber-flavored leaves. It prefers cool weather. Pink buds open to blue star-shaped flowers with a cone of black anthers. Its delicate flowers attract bees and other beneficial insects and are often used for garnish.

Burnet, salad (Perennial)

Salad burnet (*Poterium sanguisorba*) forms a 12-inch basal rosette of leaves and grows up to 2 feet across. Leaves taste and smell like cucumber and are used in salads, vinegars and butters. Salad burnet is also beautiful as landscape edging. It prefers cooler weather.

Calendula, Pot Marigold (Annual)

Calendula or pot marigold (*Calendula officinalis*) is an annual flower grown in winter. Its yellow and orange flowers are edible and can be used to color rice, pastas and soups, or it can be added to mixed salads for color. During the Civil War, a salve was made from the flowers to treat wounds.

Catmint, Catnip (Perennial)

Numerous members of the *Nepeta* genus all called catmints or catnips. *Nepeta cataria* (most often called catnip) is especially loved by cats. Both it and *Nepeta mussinii* (often marketed as catmint) make a soothing tea and can be sewn into sachets or “sleep pillows.” If you object to cats wallowing in the bed where catnip grows, you can plant some in a hanging basket, from which it will cascade and produce blue blooms when it matures.

Chamomile (Annual)

German chamomile (*Matricaria recutita*), although considered an annual, can be taken into the greenhouse and carried over the winter in more southern localities. It is used in ointments and salves, and its flowers are used as a tea, which is said to calm, sooth, and provide relief from spasms and cramps. It will grow to 18 inches in full sun to part shade. Like catnip, it can also be made into a “sleep pillow.”

Roman chamomile (*Chamaemelum nobile*) is low growing, 6–9 inches, with tall flower stalks. It releases a pleasing odor when walked on and makes a nice ground cover, for which it was used historically.

Chervil (Annual)

Chervil (*Anthriscus cerefolium*) likes cooler weather and is hardy to about 25°F. It is excellent for seasoning egg dishes and its delicate white flowers can be used in flower arrangements.

Chives (Perennial)

Onion chives (*Allium schoenoprasum*) are used in many dishes, such as spreads, butters, baked potatoes, soups, stews and more, and its lavender-colored flowers can be used in salads. Chives can be blended in water and used as an insect repellent or grown among plants that may harbor unpleasant insects. Chives, garlic, onions and leeks make excellent repellents.

Garlic chives (*Allium tuberosum*) have a delicate garlic flavor and can be used in the same manner as onion chives as a fresh addition to foods. When dried they will not hold their flavor as well as onion chives. Their white flowers can be eaten or added to salads. Flowers of both chives can be floated on punch bowls.

When trimming tops of chives, cut them about ½ inch from the ground in order to stimulate the plant to produce new growth. Chive beds should be renovated by root division every two or three years. Chives should be grown in every garden.

Comfrey (Perennial)

Comfrey (*Symphytum officinale*) is often referred to by one of its old common names—boneknit, boneset, or healing herb—in recognition of its medicinal properties. It is believed to relieve sore muscles and stop bleeding when used in the form of a compress. It is now used in face creams, said to clear certain skin problems, including acne and brown spots. This plant is propagated by root division. It can be slightly invasive, but makes a beautiful blue flower that can be used in arrangements.

Coneflower (Perennial)

Coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*) has a beautiful pink daisy-like flower that is excellent in arrangements. An extract of the root is believed to enhance the immune system and slow the aging process. This hardy perennial grows to a height of 3 feet in full sun to afternoon shade.

Coriander (Annual)

Also known as Chinese parsley or cilantro, coriander (*Coriandrum sativum*) is an annual grown for both its seed and leaf and is used in many Mexican and Asian cuisines. Leaves can be blended into a pesto for later use for butters, spreads and many other cooked foods. It likes full sun, but does not like our summer heat, which causes it to bolt quickly and go to seed.

Dill (Annual)

The fernlike leaves of dill (*Anethum graveolens*) are used in many dishes. The seeds are used in pickling and vinegars. Dill performs best as a cool weather plant and is best seeded directly into the soil to prevent early bolting.

Fennel (Annual and Perennial)

Bronze fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare* ‘Purpureum’) is a beautiful addition to the garden due to its outstanding color. It can be used in soups, fish dishes or chopped in a salad.

Florence fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare* var. *azoricum*) is an annual grown for its bulb as well as its seed and leaf. The yellow flowers can be dried for arrangements. There are many good recipes for using fennel bulbs.

Most fennels are perennial and will grow to about 4 feet high in full sun with plenty of water.

Garlic (Perennial)

The small bulbs of **silver skin garlic** (*Allium sativum* subsp. *sativum*) are excellent in cooking and are also valued for their curative effects. Silver skin garlic must be planted in the fall—September or October, ideally—in order to reach maturity in June and July in our area. Garlic is excellent for all types of dishes.

Elephant garlic (*Allium ampeloprasum* var. *ampeloprasum*) is not a true garlic but actually a relative of the garden leek. It produces a very large head with big cloves and has a milder flavor than true garlic. Its size makes it a favorite, because it is easier to chop. Double the amount called for in recipes to adjust for its mildness.

Both types of garlic like moist conditions and both require time for bulb development. Garlic may be planted as a pest deterrent near roses and other plants that are prone to attack by aphids or white flies.

Geraniums, Scented (Tender Perennials)

Scented geranium varieties (*Pelargonium* spp.) include those that smell like lemon, rose, peppermint, peach, apple, cinnamon, ginger, lime, strawberry, and many other scents. Leaves are widely used in oils, vinegars and potpourris and sometimes in sugars, jellies, and desserts.

Horehound (Perennial)

Horehound (*Marrubium vulgare*) was once used extensively in medicinal tonics, cough syrups and cough drops. It is a hardy perennial and grows to 3 feet with lovely gray-green foliage.

Lamb's Ears (Perennial)

Grown as an ornamental, lamb's ears (*Stachys byzantina*) is a good edging plant for the herb garden. It requires excellent drainage and does not hold up well to heat, humidity and heavy rains. Give it a partly shady location.

Lavender (Annuals and Perennials)

English lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*) grows to 2 feet, is bushy and full. It is not easily grown in our humidity, but, if it is grown, is best treated as an annual.

French lavender (*Lavandula stoechas*), although not as winter-hardy as the English, is a more successful plant for most local gardens. It must be lifted before frost and carried through winter as a pot plant.

Lavender is used in potpourris, bath salts, sachets and many cosmetics, and can be used for making breads, syrups and honeys. Rub on insect bites to ease pain and promote healing.

Lemon Balm (Perennial)

A hardy perennial in our area, lemon balm (*Melissa officinalis*) grows to about 18 inches and does best planted in part shade. It can easily be propagated from seeds, cuttings or divisions. It makes a wonderful tea and is used in many dishes calling for a lemon flavor, such as breads, cookies and others.

Lemongrass (Tender Perennial)

A relative of the pampas grass, though not as dangerous to handle, lemongrass (*Cymbopogon citratus*) can grow to 3–4 feet. The strongest lemon flavor is in the lower end of the stem (small bulb) section. It makes a great tea and adds lemon flavoring to the dishes of many Asian cuisines. Harvest the stem right down to ground level and chop like a scallion. It grows best in a well-drained, sunny location. If it is well mulched, lemongrass will withstand temperatures down to 15–20°F. Alternatively, lift a clump and overwinter indoors in a container.

Lemon Mint (Perennial)

Lemon mint (*Monarda citriodora*) is another good source of lemon flavor, especially in teas. It is a very showy annual that will grow to 3 feet in full sun.

Lemon Verbena (Tender Perennial)

The strongest of the lemon herbs, lemon verbena (*Aloysia triphylla*) can grow to 6–8 feet in mild winters. It does best when cut back to control sprawly growth. It is excellent used fresh in teas or dried for later uses in teas, cakes and cookies. Provide winter protection.

Lovage (Perennial)

Lovage (*Levisticum officinale*) provides a celery taste in its stems, seeds and leaves and is a good addition to salads and soups. Plant in fall in part shade.

Marjoram (Annuals and Perennials)

Sweet marjoram (*Origanum majorana*), which is actually a mild oregano, is an herb every cook needs in the herb bed or window box for use in many meat and vegetable dishes. It grows to 6–9 inches and needs full sun and moderate water. Cultivate as an annual.

Mint (Perennials)

Apple, chocolate, Corsican, English, lemon-lime, lime, orange, peppermint, pineapple, spearmint, and wintergreen are a few of the many types of mints (*Mentha* spp.). Mint is invasive but can be contained by planting in large pots or by encircling the desired area with a metal trim placed in the ground below the depth of the root system. Mint likes moist soil and will grow well in sun or shade. Keep the plant well trimmed, and, if you remove some of the root growth, replace the soil to keep the plant healthy.

Mugwort (Perennial)

Mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*) is a bushy, sprawling plant with aromatic dark green leaves. It can be invasive.

Oregano (Perennials)

A great deal of confusion surrounds the term “oregano.” The genus *Origanum* includes more than 20 different species, including the culinary herbs most commonly referred to as oregano and sweet marjoram. As a culinary herb, the name oregano is given to several totally unrelated plants that share the same or similar flavor.

The most common two plants sold as oregano in this area are *Origanum vulgare*, the oregano used in Italian or Greek cooking, and *Lippia graveolens*, or *Lippia palmeri*, a bushy shrub we call Mexican oregano. Several other plants, including *Poliomintha longiflora*, with strong oregano flavor are also sometimes called Mexican oregano.

A basic ingredient in Italian and Mexican cooking, oregano is used to season all meats, stuffing, stews, soups, spaghetti sauce, and pizza. Leaves are best used dried. Italian oregano is a relative of marjoram, though stronger.

Grow oreganos in a well-drained sunny location. Some varieties are totally winter-hardy, while others are more tender.

Parsleys (Biennials)

Without a doubt parsley is the most used and least eaten herb in the world. Millions of pounds are used to garnish everything and promptly thrown away, which is a shame because parsley is loaded with vitamins and minerals. Parsley comes in two forms, the flat leaved or **Italian parsley** (*Petroselinum crispum* var. *neapolitanum*), and the curled or **French parsley** (*Petroselinum crispum*). There are many hybrids of each available as

seeds or transplants. Seed is slow to germinate, but worth the wait. Parsley is a biennial, producing leaves the first year and flowers the next. Not only is parsley a garnish for any dish, it is excellent dipped in a batter and deep fried. Brown with butter and garlic for a sauce to baste grilled meats. Grow both kinds in full sun to part shade.

Patchouli (Tender Perennial)

Native to India, patchouli (*Pogostemon cabli*) is a great-smelling, tender perennial that can grow to 4 feet. It will not tolerate dry conditions or much cold and should winter over in the greenhouse. Used in cologne and perfumes, the smell is distinctive and very pleasing. Patchouli stems, leaves, and flowers are used in sachets or potpourris.

Pennyroyal (Perennial)

An excellent flea and mosquito repellent, pennyroyal (*Mentha pulegium*) is a strong-smelling mint and may be easily grown as a ground cover. It makes an excellent hanging basket or pot herb, but the rootball should be trimmed back and new soil added several times each year. When planted around pet quarters, pennyroyal will repel fleas. Rubbing pets with fresh pennyroyal works great.

Peppers (Annuals)

Jalapeno, serrano and many other peppers (*Capsicum* spp.) are wonderful plants to add to the herb garden, and among the most important spices to have on hand when used sparingly. Serranos are excellent and a complement to vinegars.

Rosemary (Perennial)

There are many types of rosemary (*Rosemaryinus officinalis*), but all fall generally into either the upright or prostrate varieties. Prostrate varieties are low growing, sprawling plants, sometimes reaching 2 feet or more in height. Upright types can get quite large, occasionally up to 6–8 feet. Some of the uprights, including the Arp, are more cold hardy than other varieties, but in recent years most varieties have proven to be cold hardy in our area. In general, gray-leaved varieties are more tolerant of cold temperatures. An excellent culinary herb, rosemary is used in many vegetable dishes, teas and baked goods. It is excellent on baked chicken.

Rue (Perennial)

A hardy perennial that grows to 2 feet with bluish-gray foliage and yellow button flowers, rue (*Ruta graveolens*) is often used as an insect repellent. It can cause a rash on some people, especially during the sunny part of the day.

Sage (Perennial)

Garden sage (*Salvia officinalis*) is one of the Mediterranean herbs and does not like soggy soil. It is best to let it nearly dry out before watering. This is a key ingredient in soups, stews and poultry stuffing. If you ever use the fresh sage, you won't want to go back to the dried variety from the grocery shelf.

Pineapple sage (*Salvia elegans*) is a favorite for appearance and flavor. It grows to 4 feet with lush green leaves and has red flowers that attract hummingbirds and butterflies. You can use the leaves in teas and in drinks and dishes to add a pineapple flavor. The flowers are attractive floated in punch bowls.

Tricolor sage (*Salvia officinalis* ‘Tricolor’) has variegated leaves of white, purple and green and can be used in the same way as garden sage.

Savory (Annual and Perennial)

Summer savory (*Satureja hortensis*) is an annual that may grow to 1 foot in height. It has erect branching stems and gray-green leaves.

Winter savory (*Satureja montana*) is a shrub-like perennial that grows to be about 1 foot tall.

Both savories should be placed in sunny, dry areas. Grow them for the leaves, which should be gathered before blooming begins.

Sesame (annual)

Sesame (*Sesamum indicum*) grows to 3 feet high and produces attractive green leaves and pale orchid flowers from mid-summer to early fall. It should be planted in sunny areas and spaced 8 to 10 inches apart. Sesame is grown for its seeds, which ripen about a month after flowers bloom.

Sorrell (Perennial)

Sorrell (*Rumex acetosa*) is a hardy perennial that grows to 18 inches in full sun. A great salad herb, the young leaves have a lemony flavor when used raw. Older leaves can be cooked as greens. It is excellent made into a soup.

Southernwood (Perennial)

Southernwood (*Artemisia abrotanum*) is valued as both an ornamental and aromatic plant and can be used as an air freshener and bug repellent, especially against moths. Its finely-cut, green ferny leaves emit a camphor or lemon-like fragrance.

Sweet Annie (Annual)

Growing to 5 feet, sweet Annie (*Artemisia annua*) is an attractive addition to dried arrangements, wreaths and potpourri. It has an excellent aroma and grows well in full sun with moderate water.

Tansy (Perennial)

Tansy (*Tanacetum vulgare*) is unique for its fern-like foliage and yellow button flowers, which are great for drying. It is a hardy perennial that grows to 3 feet in full sun. Both the growing plant and dried plant parts are excellent flea repellents.

Tarragon (Perennial)

True tarragon (*Artemisia dracunculus*) does not do well in our humid climate, but **Mexican mint marigold** (*Tagetes lucida*) is often grown in this area as a substitute. Mexican mint marigold produces small marigold-type flowers. Its leaves have an excellent anise flavor and can be used in many dishes and vinegars. It can withstand Texas summer heat and is very hardy in our area with a little care.

If you try growing true tarragon, don't let it become wet for very long. When planting, fill the pot about a third full of potsherds or pea gravel before adding soil, and water only when it becomes dry.

Thyme (Perennial)

With hundreds of varieties available, thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*) is a valuable plant to use in herb beds, rock gardens and as a landscape accent. Varieties available locally include common thyme, woolly thyme, mother-of-thyme, lemon thyme, English thyme, silver thyme, and golden thyme. Common thyme is usually the variety used in culinary dishes. It has a warm, aromatic scent and flavor, and blends well with beef, poultry, fish, soups and vegetable dishes. Thyme is a durable landscape plant but will not survive in soggy wet soil. Plant in a well drained, sunny location.

Wormwood (Perennial)

Wormwoods (*Artemisia absinthium*, *A. albula*, and *A. schmidtiana*) are all gray-foliage plants that are useful in dry wreaths and other arrangements where gray color is desired. Wormwoods generally tolerate dry, poor soil in full sun or part shade. These plants may develop rot problems in shade and high humidity.

Yarrow (Perennial)

Originally native to Europe, yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*) is a drought tolerant herb that has naturalized throughout temperate North America. The species epithet *millefolium* (of a thousand leaves) describes its fine, fern-like foliage. It is used for potpourri and moth repellents. Tolerant of dry conditions, yarrow produces white, yellow, or pink flowers, which can be used both fresh and dried.



Gardening fact sheets are distributed by Harris County Master Gardeners, community volunteers trained in basic horticulture by Texas Cooperative Extension. For information about Master Gardener volunteer training classes, call Harris County Cooperative Extension at 281.855.5600, or send an e-mail to harris@ag.tamu.edu.