

Growing Herbs in Texas

Herbs are plants that are used as flavoring agents. The common herbs used in cooking are referred to as culinary herbs. Mild or savory herbs impart a delicate flavor to foods while the stronger or pungent herbs add zest to foods. A number of additional herbs are used for medicinal or ornamental purposes. This publication, however, deals mainly with culinary herbs used in cooking. These herbs are attractive and varied so their ornamental value is also important.

The leaves of most herbs are the part of the plant that is used although the seeds or roots of some herbs can also be used. Herbs are used in small quantities, so usually only a few plants are necessary to provide sufficient fresh and dried herbs for the entire season.

Herb gardening is becoming popular throughout Texas. New enthusiasm for "natural" foods has heightened this interest. In addition, herbs add flavor and zest to creative cookery. Most food recipes can be accentuated with proper use of culinary herbs.

Location

The ornamental value of herbs enables them to be grown in flower beds, in rock gardens as borders or as corner plantings. Some herbs are annuals while others are perennial or come up year after year. One can locate annual herbs in annual flower gardens or vegetable gardens. Locate perennial herbs at the side of the garden where they won't interfere with next year's soil preparation.

Many gardeners establish a small herb garden near the home. Generally, a 6 to 10 foot square or rectangular area is sufficient. Circular or free-form designs can also be used.

Use the information contained in this publication for proper spacing, and locate the tallest herbs to the back of the plot.

As the garden grows

Care for the herb garden is similar to a vegetable or flower garden. Select a sunny, well-drained location. Apply a balanced fertilizer but avoid excessive use of nitrogen fertilizers. Consult the county Extension office for soil preparation, fertilization and other good garden cultural practices.

Water as necessary during dry periods. Generally, about 1 inch of water is needed per week, if not supplied by natural rainfall. A mulch helps conserve soil moisture and reduces weed growth as well. Mints prefer moist soil so they require more frequent watering.

Establishing the herb garden

Establish annual and biennial herbs by planting seed directly in the garden or starting seeds indoors for later transplanting to the garden. Save seed produced by the herb plants for next year's crop, or obtain seed from your local garden center or seed catalog.

To save your own seed, harvest the entire seedhead after it has dried on the plant. Then allow seeds to dry in a protected location that is cool and dry. After the seeds are thoroughly dry, thresh the seed from the heads and discard the trash. Store in labeled jars in a dark, cool, dry location.

Some herb seeds such as dill, anise, caraway or coriander can be used for flavoring.

Perennial herbs can be propagated by cuttings or by division. Divide plants every 3 or 4 years in the early spring. Dig up the plants and cut into several sections. You can also cut 4 to 6 inch sections of the stem, and root these by placing the cuttings in moist sand in a shady area. In 4 to 8 weeks roots should form on these cuttings. Herbs such as sage, winter savory and thyme can be propagated by cuttings. Chives, lovage and tarragon can be propagated by dividing the roots or crowns. Apple mint forms runners or stems that run along the ground so these can be easily propagated by covering a portion of the runner and allowing it to form roots.

Harvesting

Leaves of many herbs such as parsley and chives can be harvested for fresh seasonings. On these plants, gradually remove some of the leaves as needed, but don't remove all the foliage at one time. These plants produce over a long period if they are well cared for. On rosemary and thyme, clip the tops when the plants are in full bloom.

Information on Some Popular Garden Herbs

ANNUALS AND BIENNIALS: Annuals grow from seed and complete their life cycle in 1 year. They will be killed by frost and must be started from seed each year. Biennials overwinter one season and produce seed the second season.

Herb	Height (inches)	Description	Culture	Harvest	Use
Anise (<i>Pimpinella anisum</i>)	20-24	Serrated leaves, small white flowers. Low spreading plant is a slow growing annual.	Moderately rich soil. Like full sun. Space 6-8 in row with rows 12-14 in. apart.	When seeds turn brown, or use leaves while green as needed.	Seed - pastries, candy, cookies, beverages, meats, soups Leaves - salad or garnish
Basil (<i>Ocimum basilicum</i>)	20-24	Leafy, light green foliage; flowers white or lavender. Fast growing annual.	Start seed indoors in early April or seed in early spring. Space 12 in. Prefers protected sunny locations.	Harvest leaves when flowering begins. Cut plants 4-6 in. above ground.	Leaves - soups, stews, omelets, salads, meats, sauces
Borage (<i>Borago officinalis</i>)	20-24	Coarse, rough, hairy leaves. Produces light blue flowers in drooping clusters.	Seed directly in early spring. Space 12 in. apart. Seeds may be slow to germinate.	Harvest the young leaves and dry, or cook fresh like spinach.	Leaves - salads, greens. Flowers and leaf tips - pickles, soups, stews
Caraway (<i>Carum carvi</i>) BIENNIAL	12-24	Carrot-like leaf with small creamy white flowers.	Seed directly in spring and locate in full sun. Space 6 in.	Harvest leaves when mature. Seeds will form midway through second season.	Leaves - garnish Seeds - breads, cakes, soups, sauces, salads
Chervil (<i>Anthriscus cerefolium</i>)	18	Similar to parsley with light green lacy leaves. Flowers are small white clusters.	Sow seed in moist, partially shaded location. Space 6 in.	Harvest mature leaves and dry or use directly for garnishes.	Leaves - salads, soups, meats, poultry, garnishes
Coriander (<i>Coriandrum sativum</i>)	36	Large, coarse plant with white flowers	Sow seeds directly. Use full sun area and thin to 10 in.	Harvest seeds when they begin to turn brown. Seeds are generally used crushed.	Seeds - pastries, sauces, pickles, liquors
Dill (<i>Anethum graveolens</i>)	24-36	Tall plant with feathery green leaves. Open umbrella-shaped flower heads.	Seed directly and thin to 12 in. If seeds mature and fall, they will come up again next year.	Harvest mature seed heads before seeds drop. May use small leaves as well.	Sprigs of seed head or seeds - pickles, breads, sauces, meats, salads, vinegars Leaves - sauces, dips, fish, flavoring
Fennel (<i>Foeniculum vulgare</i>)	36	Fine feathery leaves with broad, bulb-like leaf base	Sow in early spring and thin to 12 in.	Harvest either young sprigs and leaves or seeds.	Sprigs - soups Leaves - garnishes Seeds - soups, breads
Parsley (<i>Petroselinum crispum</i>)	5-6	Curled or plain dark green leaves	May be slow to germinate. Seed in early spring. Space 6-8 in.	Harvest mature leaves as needed.	Leaves - garnishes
Sweet Marjoram (<i>Majorana hortensis</i>)	12	Fine textured plant with white flowers.	Start seedlings in shade. Mature plants will grow in full sun. Space 8-10 in.	Harvest mature leaves.	Leaves - salads, soups, dressings
Summer Savory (<i>Satureja hortensis</i>)	18	Small, gray-green leaves with purple and white flowers	Plant tender annual after danger of frost. Space 6-9 in.	Harvest mature leaves.	Leaves - salads, soups, dressings, poultry

PERENNIALS: They grow from seed the first year, but grow year after year. Some can be propagated by several other means as well. A straw or leaf mulch through the winter may protect them from winter damage.

Herb	Height (inches)	Description	Culture	Harvest	Use
Chives (<i>Allium schoenoprasum</i>)	12	Onion-type leaves with blue round flower head.	Can be grown in containers or outdoors in spring. Divide to increase. Space 5 in.	Clip leaves as needed.	Leaves - omelets, salads, soups, sauces, dips
Garlic Chives (<i>Allium tuberosum</i>)	12-16	Similar to chives.	Same as chives.	Same as chives.	Substitute for garlic flavor
Peppermint (<i>Mentha piperita</i>)	18	Vigorous bush-type plant with purple flowers.	Prefers rich, moist soil. Space 8-10 in.	Harvest young or mature leaves.	Leaves - soups, sauces, tea, jelly Sprigs - tea, sauces, summer drinks
Spearmint (<i>Mentha spicata</i>)	18	Pointed, crinkled leaves.	Same as peppermint.	Same as peppermint.	Leaves - summer drinks, tea, mint sauce
Lemon Balm (<i>Melissa officinalis</i>)	24	Crinkled, dull green leaves with white blossoms. Vigorous grower.	Space 12 in. Prefers full sun.	Harvest mature leaves.	Leaves - soups, meats, tea, summer drinks
Lovage (<i>Levisticum officinale</i>)	24-36	Grows quite tall.	May start indoors and move to sunny location. Space 12-15 in.	Harvest mature leaves.	Substitute for celery flower
Oregano (<i>Origanum vulgare</i>)	24	Choose English strains. Produces pink flowers.	Plant in rich soil. Space 8-10 in. Start in protected location and move to full sun.	Harvest mature leaves.	Leaves - soups, meats (roasts), stews, salads
Rosemary (<i>Rosmarinus officinalis</i>)	36	Dark green foliage with small blue flowers.	Start cuttings in early spring. Space 24 in.	Harvest mature leaves.	Leaves and sprigs - meats, sauces, soups Dried leaves - sachets to hang in closets with garments
Sage (<i>Salvia officinalis</i>)	18	Shrub-like plant with gray-green leaves and purple flowers	Plant in well-drained location. Space 30 in.	Harvest leaves before flowering.	Leaves - meats, poultry, tea, fish, dressing, stews
Tarragon (<i>Artemisia dracunculus</i>)	24	Select French tarragon. Fine, dark green leaves.	Prefers well-drained soils. Space 12 in.	Harvest mature leaves or sprigs.	Leaves - salads, sauces, eggs, vegetables, salad vinegars
Thyme (<i>Thymus vulgaris</i>)	8-12	Narrow, dark green leaves.	Start seeds indoors. Prefers full sun and well-drained soils. Space 10-12 in.	Harvest leaves and flower clusters before first flowers open.	Leaves - soups, salads, dressings, omelets, gravies, breads, vegetables

Usually, leaves and flowers are harvested together. Basil, fennel, mint, sage, summer savory, sweet marjoram, tarragon and winter savory are harvested just before the plants start to bloom. Chervil and parsley leaves can be cut and dried anytime. Harvest lovage leaves early during the first flush of growth.

Drying

After harvesting, hang herbs in loosely tied bundles in a well-ventilated room. You can also spread the branches on a screen or cheesecloth, or spread herb leaves on flat trays when only the leaves are needed. To keep dust off the herbs, use a cloth or similar protective cover that allows moisture to pass through.

It is generally best to dry naturally in a cool, dark room rather than use artificial heat. Experts can use artificial heat, but you may lose flavor and quality by attempting this drying method.

Storage

When herbs are thoroughly dry, seal them in airtight containers such as fruit jars and store in a cool, dark location. Any sign of moisture accumulating in the jars indicates that the herbs are not thoroughly dry. Pulverize flower stalks before putting them in jars. Store foliage herbs either pulverized or as whole leaves, depending on their intended use.

Potted herbs

Some herbs can be placed in pots and grown indoors during winter months. Place in a sunny south window, and use care similar to houseplants. Either dig up herbs toward the end of the growing season and place in pots, or start from seed indoors. Basil, chives, mint, parsley, sweet marjoram and rosemary are best adapted to pot culture.

Information

Several sources of information are available on herbs. Books on herbs are available at local libraries. Organized groups interested in herbs and their culture and uses include:

Herb Society of America
300 Massachusetts Avenue
Boston, MA 02115

National Herb Society
424 Perkins Street
Oakland, CA 94610

ASHS Working Group on Spices
701 North St. Asaph Street
Alexandria, VA 22314-1998

Texas Herb Growers and Marketing Association
32920 Decker Prairie Road
Magnolia, TX 77355

Sources of Herbs

Your local garden center or seed dealer may have seeds or plants available for various herbs.

Seeds

A few of the catalog sources include the following firms:

- ! W. Atlee Burpee, Clinton, IA
- ! Cottage Herb Farm, Marlboro, NH
- ! Joseph Harris Seed Company, Rochester, NY
- ! Gurney's Seed Company, Yankton, SD
- ! George Park Seed Company, Greenwood, SC
- ! St. Louis Seed Company, 411 North Broadway, St. Louis, MO
- ! Nichols Herb and Rare Seed, 1190 North Pacific Highway, Albany OR
- ! Herb Gatherings, 5742 Kenwood, Kansas City, MO 64110

Plants

Plant sources include the following firms:

- ! Garden of Herbs, Route 2, Box 414, Coeur d'Alene, ID
- ! Rogers Herb Farm, Holbrook Street, Norfolk, ME
- ! Tool Shed Herbs, Salem Center, Westchester County, NY
- ! Taylors Garden, 2649 Stingle Avenue South, San Gabriel, CA
- ! Devonshire Nursery, Box 425, Vista, CA

The information given herein is for educational purposes only. Reference to commercial products or trade names is made with the understanding that no discrimination is intended and no endorsement by the Cooperative Extension Service is implied.

Texas Agricultural Extension Service ! Zerle L. Carpenter, Director ! The Texas A&M University System ! College Station, Texas

Educational programs conducted by the Texas Agricultural Extension Service serve people of all ages regardless of socioeconomic level, race, color, sex, disability or national origin.